



Maryknoll Lay Missioners
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Susan Nagele, MD, Keynote Speaker
Presentation Transcript

It is so good to be here with all of you tonight. Preparing for this talk, I admit I got a little nervous. But, when I looked at the list of people coming to this gathering, I got excited. I know that **all** of you consider Maryknoll Lay Missioners to be worth spending this evening with us. Some of you are fellow missionaries, and have given tremendously of yourselves in service to others. Some of you provide funding that sustains Maryknoll Lay Missioners in mission – very critical since our work couldn't happen without financial support. Others of you are curious or moved by what you have experienced from Maryknoll Lay Missioners. Regardless, I am really happy to be in the same room with you.

I came to Maryknoll in 1984 just after finishing my residency in family medicine. I didn't have the responsibilities of a private practice and it was a good time to give back some of what I had received.

While in school I had volunteered for a couple of short term mission trips, but I knew I wanted a Catholic organization where I could serve for several years; maybe even longer. I had read the Maryknoll magazine in my grandmother's house and saw that the program offered laity a solid place in overseas ministry. While going through Maryknoll Lay Missioners' mutual mission placement process, something kept nudging me towards Africa. The regional teams offered me a ministry in Tanzania to get a hospital back on its feet and I took it as my first mission assignment. It was a peaceful country with lots of needs and challenges and it was a really good place to start. I had the support of a good group of people including Maryknoll Lay Missioner, Sandy Cavendish and Maryknoll Fathers Jim Conard, Tom Tiscornia and later Carl Meulemanns.

After six years, I moved to South Sudan, **the** most challenging place to live and work for me, but it has the deepest place in my heart. It taught me to live in the moment and trust in God completely.

Over and over again, I saw how much the people we served could surprise me with their resilience:

- One day a woman walked 12 miles to bring her 10 year old daughter to us



with a burning fever and rigid neck and spine. She was so sick with meningitis. I treated her but wasn't optimistic she would live.

- At the same time, a young woman came unable to deliver her baby. She needed a C-section, but all I had was a vacuum extractor. With much difficulty the baby finally came with a good healthy cry. I was relieved, grateful and exhausted!
- At midnight, I looked in on the little girl with meningitis. Her fever was still high so I went to bed and said a prayer that she wouldn't suffer too much longer.
- The next morning I could hardly get out of bed since my arms and back were in so much pain because of all the pulling on the baby the night before. Visiting the young mother, I found her sitting up on the bed, smiling and happily nursing her baby. It was clear she was far stronger than I was. Next I went to the room with the little girl and found her fever had broken. She was starting to wake up and eventually she recovered completely and walked back home.
- Experiences like these have taught me to try and always just be in the present moment, which is God's time. This is where we need to be...always.

A dear Maryknoll Lay Mission friend, Marj Humphrey and I, had worked together in South Sudan and then we moved on to Kenya. I was asked to renovate another hospital and Marj was working with the Medical Missionaries of Mary. They did the pioneering work of bringing communities to recognize AIDS as a disease. Initially they provided treatment for adults and later, due to Marj's efforts, treatment for children. Our efforts saved people's lives by providing medication, the knowledge to recognize AIDS the kindness to care for them with compassion.

Two of these children, Daisy and her brother Geoffrey, came when they were 5 and 3 years old. Daisy was admitted almost every month to our hospital before Marj started her on anti-retroviral drugs and basically saved her life. During my last two years at this hospital, Daisy never needed to be admitted again because Marj's treatment was so successful. Daisy and Geoffrey have both grown up and into their own. Our mission calling is always to work collaboratively to solve problems and address the needs of these communities.

Those needs could be extreme and, at times, frightening. In 2008 there was massive post-election violence that caused 9000 people to be displaced to our little town and fill up our hospital. Maryknoll Fr. John Conway asked me if I looked for



trouble or it just seemed to follow me around. I assure you it was the latter. Nevertheless, in hindsight I wonder if this wasn't the main reason I was sent to this hospital. Chris Cahalan, another Maryknoll lay missionary, was a fabulous nurse/chaplain/social worker who helped us to cope with the deluge of displaced people. All our hard work helped us to recognize how much we were capable of doing. It's impossible to escape the difficult reality of so many people in need. After the worst was over I again felt the urge to move on.

But I couldn't. I got sick. This was the most humbling, frightening, painful and fruitful experience in my life. It took my medical colleagues 6 months to give me the right diagnosis and start the medicine that allows me to stand here today.

The great tennis athlete Venus Williams and I share one thing in common...the disease Sjogren's syndrome. I cannot thank Maryknoll Lay Missioners, and especially Sam Stanton, enough for supporting me through this illness. Most other 'companies' would have let me go after three months when I was still unable to do my work.

Venus returned to Wimbledon and I returned to Mombasa where I currently work assisting the Kenyan Health Coordinator of the Archdiocese. The population is estimated to be 3.8 million with 36% Muslim and 10% Catholic. The medical needs of the coast of Kenya continue to increase as the ability of the government to function decreases.

Considering the statistics and analysis of the region, the tasks of providing quality healthcare can be daunting. We have the third highest rate of HIV infection in the country and recently there have been outbreaks of cholera and dengue fever. Overall, the incidence of malaria is decreasing with the use of insecticide treated nets. But, the government is frequently short of malaria test kits and medications. More than half of pregnant women deliver at home without a trained attendant.

Lack of oxygen to the newborn is a major cause of epilepsy which is a common illness that is also caused by malaria and meningitis. Girls are often married and pregnant by age 13. One in three girls will be sexually assaulted during their first sexual encounter. Systems for medical care after sexual assault and legal redress exist only in Mombasa town. The coast is also plagued by drug abuse and human trafficking which increases transmission of sexually transmitted infections including HIV. Chronic illnesses such as diabetes and high blood pressure are increasing as well as cancer. The government has only one cancer specialist who comes to Mombasa one day each month. The only two radiation machines used to treat



cancer are 400 miles away and a few months ago they were both broken.

Despite these challenges, I know we can improve health care by working together. The most important work I do is to help others do their work better. The first four years I worked with Sr. Pauline, a nurse midwife and a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph. They are a local congregation founded to serve the Archdiocese of Mombasa which is bigger than the state of Maryland and has roads that are as bad as some that I saw in South Sudan. She is a very capable woman but she was overwhelmed with the amount of work she had to do. We had 16 clinics when I came in 2010 and during the next 4 years we renovated two clinics and opened 5 new clinics.

One of the new clinics we opened is St. Patrick's dispensary in an informal settlement called Bangladesh. This is home to over 50,000 people. The nurse in charge is Judy Walter, a Maryknoll lay missionary with special training in hospice care and chaplaincy. The government has no health care facility for these people and she has battled the county government to finally get vaccinations but, they would not give her a vaccine fridge. To solve the problem, we bought a local fridge and set up a solar back up system.

However, sometimes the electricity goes off for more than four days. This is more than the solar back up system can support and she has to find a fridge somewhere else to store the vaccines. Nevertheless, this clinic distributed the second highest number of vaccinations last year out of 21 clinics in the Archdiocese. When children under the age of five are fully vaccinated childhood mortality decreases and illness due to measles, polio, whooping cough and other preventable diseases can even be eliminated.

One of the clinics we renovated was Kikambala Catholic Dispensary. Coralie Salvador is a Maryknoll lay missionary who gets things done! She helped the local staff to get the clinic going again and has since handed over her administrative duties to one of the community health workers whom she trained. Coralie helped organize the World AIDS day program last year held at Kikambala for the entire Archdiocese. Personnel from all the clinics came to this parish for Mass, a procession through the village and testing and screening services held at the clinic afterwards. Coralie also helped to set up epilepsy services in this and other clinics. She has now moved on to provide this service in Bamba.

To get to Bamba you have to drive over some pretty bad roads. Sr. Veronicah is my driver as well as the pharmacist and Sister in Charge of both Bamba and Giriama



clinics where we have made renovations to both units. She is a younger Sister with a lot of energy and get up and go. But she needs advice and support with how to manage the clinics. However, when it comes to driving and pulling the broken car of the parish priest, I leave her to make the best decisions!

Considering how serving as a Maryknoll Lay Missioner has affected me, I remember the privilege of attending our founding assembly. We chose our eight core values to guide us in our primary focus on cross cultural ministry and I feel they were some of the best things we did at that gathering.

Sam shared these with you earlier, and some are common to mission groups, such as gospel values, witness, cross cultural ministry and building bridges with the US Catholic church. Several of our values are special and distinct for me and I continue to reflect on their relevance to my own life.

The church in East Africa still has a big division between the clergy who have ultimate authority, and the rest of the faithful, not to mention the exclusion of women beyond a certain point. However, I find our value of ecclesial teams unique and some dioceses try to include all vocations in planning and providing pastoral services. I enjoyed being part of a Sudanese diocese team alongside a Sudanese woman catechist, Regina, four priests (three of whom are Irish and one Nigerian) and two Maryknoll Sisters.

Regina was the seventh wife of Festus, a man who had paid the equivalent of \$10,000 in livestock for each of his wives. By most standards they weren't "poor". But they were a community marginalized by their need for education, health care, and they were interested to learn more about this Jesus who came from the one God they already believed in. With reflection I grew in my own understanding of our Maryknoll Lay Mission core value, "option for the poor." Rather than lumping a group of people together, labeling them and then coming to save them from their poverty, I now prefer to use the term 'those in need'. We all have needs and many of 'the poor' have ministered to my needs during my own faith journey.

Which leads me to another core value, conversion.

We are all on this journey of life together. This value as defined by Maryknoll Lay Missioners states, in part, 'Mission is, at its center, a journey towards transformation. As we are transformed and others are transformed the world will be transformed.'

- When I first went to Kenya I became friends with Eunice, the cashier at the hospital. She was about my age, was raising 7 children, had a husband who



was a teacher and who went to Mass every Sunday. But he had several women on the side and spent his money educating his boys rather than his girls.

- When she needed thyroid surgery he refused to pay for it. She was certainly a woman with many needs. But so was I and she was strong and caring. She could see when I was pushing myself and needed to take a break or get more rest...and she told me so. She was excited to get a chance to make a retreat and participate in days of recollection at the hospital. We talked about lots of frustrations in the hospital....sexual violence, corrupt politicians and the many sad and shocking stories that patients told us about things that happened to them during the post-election violence.
- Eunice was a woman who helped me to grow and change and hopefully, because of the two of us changed, the world is changed a little bit as well.

Lastly, the value of “community” is one we are continually working at. With the longest history of recruiting, training, sending and sustaining lay people overseas from the US Catholic Church; we have a good foundation for building strong communities with good networks. We try to make mission placements to serve the local needs by sending people with the necessary skills and spirituality. We are open to accepting Brothers, priests, and Sisters as members to work alongside laity and are unique in this respect.

We commit ourselves to support, challenge and hold one another accountable to our values. Maryknoll Lay Missioners who have longer mission experience and wisdom are a big help in assisting new lay missionaries. Long term missionaries are possible because Maryknoll Lay Missioners has continually worked to provide benefits that help to address our special needs, such as continuing education, sabbaticals, renewals and pensions. I am certainly one who has received all these benefits, and am very grateful.

Looking to the future, I try to listen to what it is God is calling me to do and to ‘be.’

- I hear God calling our church to put more emphasis on participation of laity. We need missionaries who are married as well as single to share our strong Catholic family values.
 - Early on in ministry in Tanzania the medical assistant I worked with commented on how some Protestant missionaries went to the market. The man went with his wife and they each carried one handle of the basket between them. It was almost unheard of at that time that a



man should help his wife in the market and it made a big impression on this man.

This occasion of 40 years is an appropriate time to acknowledge the strengths that Maryknoll Lay Missioners brings as a leader in preparation for overseas mission. We have depth of experience with more than 40 years in the US Catholic church. We have excellent programs for selection and admission of lay missioners.

The orientation program here in New York is well developed. Programs for language and cultural training in the countries of ministry are requirements for preparing our lay missioners to communicate well and understand and respect the people they serve in their ministries.

Our current Mombasa lay mission community includes Teresa Villaruz, our youngest member, who is an excellent example of hope for Maryknoll Lay Missioners' future. She is the newest member to the Kenyan region and full of energy, commitment and ability. She is a hard-working, professional primary school teacher...and she has a maturity and deep spirituality that belies her 26 years. God called Teresa and she joined Maryknoll Lay Missioners.

It is this guidance of the Holy Spirit that will bring our organization to lead lay mission service and carry us through the next 40 years of mission outreach.

I have reflected on my role as a Maryknoll Lay Missioner in light of how the world is changing and globalizing. During the past 10 years I have met countless young Kenyans who are well qualified and eager to improve their communities and country.

They are so often frustrated by corruption, politics, deceit and negative ethnicity...both in government and our own church. More and more I see my role as one of listening to their frustrations, confirming or challenging their ideas and opinions and helping them to develop a spirituality for the long haul. Change comes very slowly and what I thought might come in two years usually took four to six years. I encourage us all to look for those places where we can support, encourage and walk with people together to continue along the journey and improve our world.

I am very grateful to have been able to do what I thought God was calling me to. It would not have been possible without Maryknoll Lay Missioners and our mission partners. I know the Holy Spirit will continue to inspire and guide us along the path and the journey ahead will take us to even better places than we can even imagine at this moment...which of course is **the** eternal moment and the place to be...always.