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Foreign priests, enculturation programs proliferate

Angela Cave Catholic News Service | Jul. 30, 2009

Father John Orenge Omboga, who grew up in the Diocese of Ngong, Kenya, serves as parochial vicar for Our Lady of the Lakes Catholic Community the finger lakes region of New York state. He is pictured inside St. Michael Church in Penn Yan, N.Y., in 2008. (CNS photo)

WASHINGTON
It was simple for Uganda native Father Alfred Onyutha to bring his ministry to America almost four years ago -- he filled out a form and was on his way.
"I didn't have much (of an) interview," Father Onyutha said from his office at St. Margaret's Church in Woodbury Heights, N.J.

But behind the scenes, the Diocese of Camden, N.J., had a lot to consider when reviewing Father Onyutha's credentials. He needed to commit to five years, have a working knowledge of English and bring enough money to buy a car. His sending bishop needed to sign off on things like physical and psychological health, the ability to live and work with people of diverse backgrounds and freedom from demanding family obligations, according to guidelines from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Because dioceses are not required to follow the bishops' guidelines, procedures vary widely for accepting and orientating international priests. Some common steps are background checks, training in the Virtus child protection program, Homeland Security procedures and visa assistance.

Foreign priests made up 16 percent of the U.S. priesthood in 1999, the last year a major study on them was conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University in Washington.

Father Terry Odien, vicar for clergy in the Camden Diocese, where there are 31 international priests, said he tries to interview the candidates in person, but that is not always possible.

After reviewing references, conducting background checks and interviewing for six months, the Diocese of Owensboro, Ky., requests a video of the priest giving a homily in English, said Father Darrell Venters, clergy representative there. People other than the interviewer can then judge the applicant's English pronunciation and theology and ascertain whether he will need accent-reduction training upon arrival.

The Diocese of San Jose, Calif., also asks for videos. They do the same for domestic priests, said Nancy Jolliff,

assistant in the vicar for clergy's office. About 65 of their 100 priests are foreign-born.
Whereas some dioceses let the applicants find them, others actively seek priests overseas.

Bishop Edmond Carmody, of Corpus Christi, Texas, discovered back when he led the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, that India is a good place to find priests. The Diocese of Corpus Christi now has 46 international priests, thanks in part to Bishop Carmody's trips abroad.

Other dioceses may not have someone travel to find priests, but they establish mutually beneficial relationships with foreign bishops.
For instance, the Diocese of Richmond, Va., makes "covenants" with bishops: It will send $5,000 for seminary education and $6,000 for priest health care in exchange for priests, said Msgr. Mark Richard Lane, vicar for clergy. This method started five years ago, and about four bishops from Uganda and the Philippines have signed on.

The Camden Diocese -- which gets three to five letters a week from foreign priests -- now looks for applicants willing to visit parishioners in the hospital and help them find ways to pay their bills.

"We need to invite them to tell us more than just 'I speak Spanish,'" Father Odien said. "It's really about being a bridge between the church and the people."

In Uganda, priests report monthly to outposts, where parents wait to have their children baptized, Father Odien said. They come to America thinking their role will be to provide sacraments.

Other cultural differences can be disconcerting for an international priest. Ugandan Father Onyutha is used to dancing and singing at three-hour, community-oriented Masses in Africa.

"It was like, what's happening here?" he said of his first Mass in America, which he described as more individualistic.

Two weeks into his stay, he attended a two-week crash course in American culture, and the culture shock began to subside. Parishioners welcomed him as a man of God and began to feel like family to him, he said.

"I felt at home away from home," said Father Onyutha, whose five-year commitment was recently extended by another six years. He goes home once a year.

About half of U.S. dioceses have an orientation program, according to the book "International Priests in America." Fifty-four percent have a program for English training.

Sister Kathryn Pierce, a member of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, has helped acculturate between 300 and 400 priests in the past 20 years. She charges $700, including tuition and room and board, for a five-day workshop addressing the history of the Catholic Church in the United States, other Christian denominations and understanding the American value system. She also trains people in the receiving diocese.

"Both people are going to be changed by the process," Sister Kathryn said. "Otherwise, the international priest will go through it all, and the parish will remain the same."

Paulist Father Brett Hoover, an instructor at the Cultural Orientation Program for International Ministers at Loyola Marymount University in California, said some priests can be surprised or even offended when parishioners call them by their first name and ask for advice about drug addictions or homosexuality. Some are not accustomed to women in leadership or to ethnic diversity in parishes.

"They come with expectations on how to serve the church, but those expectations are shaped by the countries

they come from," said Father Hoover, whose program serves between 20 and 35 students yearly in southern California and between 15 and 20 in northern California.

The Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio also tacks on computer skills and language skills to its four-week program, which attracts priests from anywhere in the country.

"They're sending good people," said Father Henry Walker, a member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. "When they come in the program open-minded, they're on fire. They're ready to go."

The Richmond Diocese runs its own three- to six-month mentoring program and also sends priests to a parish for management training and to the Presbyterian School of Christian Education for church business administration.

Father Venancio Balarote, pastor at St. Pius X in Norfolk, Va., came to the United States from the Philippines in 2004. He said the mentoring program didn't cover every aspect of American life, but it was informative.

"It has enriched my horizon to see the beauty of other cultures," Father Balarote said. "I've been blessed with the parish I'm in. What can I ask for more?"

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