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Sharing the spirit of Francis and Clare

Beth Griffin | Feb. 27, 2010

During a Franciscan Common Venture leadership meeting in 2005, Marlene Weisenbeck, right, of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, offers comfort to a young patient at an orthopedic hospital in Bafut, Cameroon.

A giant washing machine does not immediately conjure images of international peacemaking, but it could -- and it does, for four congregations of Franciscan sisters.

Ten years ago, the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis did all the laundry for their 200-bed hospital in Shisong, Cameroon, by hand, sanitizing the sheets in huge vats of water boiled over a wood fire. Today, they use industrial washing machines provided by Franciscan sisters in the United States.

The washing machines have made a huge difference at St. Elizabeth?s Hospital, of course, but they are only a small symbol of a transformational experience that brought together three long-separated American Franciscan congregations in a project to ?companion? a growing province of diverse West African women. Their aid, dubbed the ?Common Venture,? includes material, financial, administrative, academic and theological support for the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis, whose ministries encompass education, health care and parish service.

The three American communities are the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi in Milwaukee, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse, Wis., and the Franciscan Sisters of the

Eucharist in Meriden, Conn.

Although the three have contributed more than $1.5 million in goods and services to the West African sisters, the participating congregations describe the true gifts exchanged among the four groups in terms of relationship-building, reconciliation and a better understanding of their mission as Franciscans.

They celebrated the international collaboration and their commitment to contemporary peacemaking at a conference in La Crosse in August. The event, called ?Together, Creating a Culture of Peace,? explored forgiveness and peacemaking in the Franciscan, Islamic and Buddhist traditions.

The peace conference Aug. 1 marked the 10th anniversary of the Common Venture, a project that grew out of an anniversary celebration of the common founding of the three American Franciscan groups in 1849. Their founders came from Bavaria and experienced the ecclesiastical challenges and growing pains of establishing themselves in a new country. Before they were on American soil for 25 years, they had reorganized into two groups, the Sisters of St. Francis and the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Since 1878, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration have sponsored uninterrupted continuous eucharistic adoration in La Crosse.

During the post-Vatican II renewal, when religious orders were encouraged to explore their charism and mission, a group of 55 sisters separated from the Perpetual Adoration sisters. In 1973, they became the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist. Sr. Shaun Vergauwen, mother general of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, and Sr. Marlene Weisenbeck, president of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and current president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, said the separation was quite painful and marked by tension as the members of each group struggled to follow their own vision.

At the invitation of Sr. Marla Lang, then president of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, the leaders of the three groups came together to discuss a joint celebration in 1999 of their sesquicentennial. Lang said, ?There were still some residual issues of reconciliation that needed to be dealt with, but the leadership decided it would be worth the risk to celebrate in a communal way.? She said each leader offered a ritual of welcome and acknowledged the mutual experience of brokenness.

Lang said the leaders decided that the celebration should not be focused inward on their history, but should be marked by an outward expression of their mission.

Serendipitously, Lang encountered her Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis counterpart, Sr. Anna Nyuydini, at an international Franciscan conference in Assisi. The program spoke of inner transformation and conversion. Nyuydini and Lang saw that the global reconciliation they sought could be achieved through a ?companioning relationship? between their groups. Back home in Wisconsin, Lang floated the idea as an anniversary project -- and the washing machine was on its way to equatorial Cameroon.

The practical effect of the Common Venture is that the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis call on resources of three congregations, each with its own specialties. The Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis asked for training and education for the leaders of their schools, health care facilities, and formation programs. The American congregations responded with seats at their own universities in the United States, and tuition aid for higher education closer to Cameroon. American sisters bring administrative, organizational and theological training, and retreat programs to Cameroon and facilitate provincial chapters for the women they are ?companioning.?

Lang said 10 percent of the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis in Cameroon have a university degree and the province has identified education as a primary need. ?If the sisters can receive post-secondary education, it will further their leadership,? she said.

She likened the role of the sisters in the Cameroon to that of sisters in the United States in the late 19th century. ?The systems of health care and education are being built up through religious orders. The sisters are pioneers for the people in their country. They?re creating roads and pathways to pass on the faith and there is a lot of diversity in the development of religious life,? she said.

Lang said the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis struggle with the dynamics of tribal diversity among their members. ?We see parallels that have made us aware that what we have experienced is not so uncommon,? she said.

Alexine Nii, a Tertiary Sister of St. Francis, is finishing her doctorate in psychology and counseling services at the Adler School of Psychology in Chicago. She said, ?The Common Venture has penetrated every fiber of the being of every sister in the Cameroon, either directly or indirectly. It has a deep impact on our ability to be effective in our mission for the people in Cameroon.? She added that education for the sisters in their professional fields and their Franciscan spirituality is a source of empowerment to them as individuals.

Nii said her community has a different approach to its mission than do the sisters in the United States, in part because of the practical challenges of daily life. She said, ?We don?t have as much attention to structure and the lines of communication are not as strong. Our formation programs may be interrupted by tending to people who need food or children who are on the street, because we don?t have the [government] institutions that take care of those needs here.?

Living with the sisters from the Common Venture groups, she observed that their sense of mission as community is well-defined and permeates the consciousness of all the members, even if they don?t live in physical community.

Nii will be the second member of her province to earn a doctorate. She said the skills she is developing in the United States will help her deal with the diverse backgrounds of the postulants who enter her community and the people they serve. She is particularly interested in mental health, a nascent field in Cameroon. The 300 Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis operate two hospitals, 16 village health centers and 60 bush clinics, as well as a nursing school and midwife training program.

The Common Venture members in the United States are eager to share the fruits of their renewal with the West African sisters, but the process has not been without its bumps. The Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis in Cameroon are the largest province of a Northern Italian congregation whose roots are deeply German and Austrian. Lang said the German and Austrian sisters had reservations about the Common Venture, fearing it might be ?too American, too Western, too progressive,? she said. ?We?re just trying to share what we have become as Franciscan women in today?s world.?

Lang knew the ice had broken when the head of the Austrian province of the Sisters of St. Francis ?finally walked up to me in the garden one day at a meeting I was facilitating and asked, ?Is there any way we could have some of that Common Venture in Bolivia?? ?

The Common Venture members in the United States overcame their own differences by acknowledging them. Lang said, ?We recognize we each have our own gifts and diversity is good.?

Speaking for the youngest of the American congregations, the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, Vergauwen said, ?In our growth and development, we felt mature enough to relate to the mother [group] and mend bridges. We had a desire for some type of reconciliation.?

The Common Venture is not a prelude to any type of merging of the groups, say their leaders. Each group is attracting new members, and Vergauwen said, ?We see ourselves as having very separate identities. None of us is suffering. We?re more like four strong entities trying to relate to each other.?

Vergauwen hopes the Common Venture will be a model for working together that can be adopted by other religious communities. ?It?s not so much a project as four communities trying to walk together and look at needs. We have entered into personal relationships and community relationships that are a blessing to all of us,? she said.

Lang said, ?Relationship is the greatest gift in all of this. There is value in learning the meaning of life through the lens of another culture, knowing women in another part of the world who share the same spirit of Francis and Clare.?

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