

Kenya – A Brief History 1974

by Mary Gen Olin, SSND, 2001

Bishop Mugendi came to the United States in 1971, soon after being ordained bishop of the Diocese of Kisii, Kenya. He was searching for a place to send Kenyan Sisters from the diocese for higher education and for American Sisters who would come to Kenya to help upgrade the level of education of indigenous Sisters of the diocese. Some of the Sisters had no basic education and others needed to complete either primary or secondary education. Most Catholic colleges in the US seemed too large and sophisticated to him. He was about to leave for Kenya when the Sisters of St. Peter Claver in St. Paul, MN called him and told him about Good Counsel. Sister Margareta, Mankato Provincial Leader, met with him and agreed that the Province would sponsor Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph for study. The first Sisters arrived in 1972 and over the years ten Kenyan Sisters received their degrees in Minnesota.

The second part of Bishop Mugendi's request came to the Provincial Chapter of Affairs in July, 1973 as a proposal submitted by Sister Eunice. The proposal had a double thrust: to assist in upgrading the level of education of indigenous sisters in Kenya and to administer a secondary school in the Diocese of Kisii. This proposal was supported by the Assembly (then called the Provincial Chapter of Affairs) The first Sisters arrived in Kenya on August 28, 1974. They were Sisters Maris Simon and Mara Frundt from the Mankato Province and Sister Mary Martin Colbert from the Chicago Province.

The first SSND house in Kenya was at Nyabururu outside of Kisii. There the Sisters began St. Francis Upgrading Center. Begun originally with the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph, it was later expanded to serve other religious communities. Ninety seven Sisters eventually attended the center. Other Sisters from Mankato and Milwaukee continued to come to Kenya in this period of history.

In 1977 the decision was made to take over Gekano Girls Secondary School in the Kisii Diocese and it was renamed St. Theresa's in honor of our Mother Theresa. Sister Dianne Perry and Sister Kathryn Berger moved there from the Upgrading Center and began the school year at Gekano in January, 1978. In 1979 three Gekano girls asked to join the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Their request was ahead of our readiness and they were advised to enter other religious communities. In 1984 Sister Ann Schoch became headmistress of Gekano Girls and continued in that position until 1990. Under her long term leadership the school grew from one stream to two streams (two classes each of Form I, II, III, IV) and maintained a good reputation. Since that time Gekano has

suffered from much turnover in SSND leadership and staffing. We continue to struggle to sponsor the school and to maintain its good reputation.

St. Theresa's Gekano is a private school (called then a Harambee school). This means it runs on school fees and fund raising alone and does not receive government help. It is located in the highlands above Kisii about 45 minutes drive. As the roads continue to disintegrate in Kenya a four wheel drive vehicle is usually needed to reach the school. St. Theresa's Gekano is a fine school with a capacity for about 300 boarders. At this time, due to the availability of many more day schools, the population of Gekano is closer to 275. Due to the altitude the climate is cool. Rain is abundant and the soil is fertile. There is no electricity or telephone at Gekano. Students study by light from a generator early in the morning and in the evening. This year, 2001, Gekano celebrates its twenty five year jubilee. (The school had been opened shortly before the SSNDs arrive.) Sister Carolyn Anyega, Kenyan SSND headmistress, is planning the Silver Jubilee celebration of our first SSND sponsored school in Kenya.

In 1979 Bishop Okoth, the new bishop of Kisumu, visited Mankato and personally invited Sister Eunice to teach in the Kisumu Seminary. Sister Eunice arrived in Kenya the following September only to find out that the seminary existed only in the mind of the bishop! In 1980 while waiting for St. Gabriel's seminary in the Kisumu Diocese to begin, Sister Eunice headed Ojolla Girls Secondary School, now called Bishop Okoth Girls Secondary School at Ojolla. The school was struggling to make a beginning. Ojolla had been abandoned as a mission years before and was just coming to life again. Two classrooms lacked ceilings and floors and another one was occupied by a huge ant hill. Sister Eunice records, however, that the staff was wonderful and that many friends and relatives of Sister Eunice helped purchase desks, books and other necessities to begin the school. The bishop sent 40 bags of cement and the Belgian government sent aid. Subsequently Sister Dianne Perry headed the school followed by Sister Kathryn Berger. The SSND years at Ojolla were a time of building and shaping an excellent school. Sister Francanne Etringer and later Sister Mary Kerber and Sister Michael Marie Laux (ML) taught at Ojolla. In 1991 we turned Ojolla over to the Sisters of Mary, an indigenous community, as was the mission philosophy of the Kenya Area before we began formation. Sister Michael Marie Laux stayed on as a teacher in the school until 1992 to aid in the transition. Sister Rose Anthony Krebs lived at Ojolla and taught at the primary school adjacent to the secondary school compound. Because Sister Rose Anthony was not employed by primary schools as a regular classroom teacher she often was called upon by the community to move to missions where she was needed as a community member. She graciously did this during her eight years in Kenya always finding a nearby primary school in which to volunteer.

In the early years SSNDs were involved in formation with several indigenous communities. Sisters Martin Colbert and Maris Simon taught the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph at their motherhouse at Asumbi, Sister Carola Redig (ML)

taught both the Sisters of Nazareth at Meru in the Meru Diocese and the Little Sisters of St. Joseph at Kilgoris in the Ngong Diocese. Sisters Eunice and Ara Coeli Stoff (ML) taught in the seminary near Kisumu. More recently Sister Mary Kerber has taught at the seminary in Tindinyo and at seminaries in Nairobi, including helping to begin the Social Ministry division of Tangaza College

In order to understand the history of SSND in Kenya, it is important to know that Sisters have always been involved with other ministries which are not defined as formal education, but as education in the broader sense. In 1983 Sister Mara Frundt and Ara Coeli Stoll began as pastoral ministers in the northern desert at Loarengak in the Diocese of Lodwar. Sister Dolores Rausch, a retired Geography professor from Mount Mary in Milwaukee, oversaw a program called MAD funded by the Ford Foundation for action against desertification by planting trees and terracing crops. Sister Francanne Etringer worked at the hospital in Tabaka as a physical therapist. Sister Margaret Breiter was an administrator at Ukweli Pastoral center near Kisumu. Both Sister Roxanne Schares and Sister Mary Kerber worked for the Diocese of Kisii and the Diocese of Kisumu respectively in a program for inservice in the Catholic faith for school teachers. Both of these Sisters also helped to plan and write these programs which have been used nationwide. In recent years Sister Rozanne Schares has worked with refugees and Sister Mary Jo Welter does spiritual direction, in-service for teachers, facilitation and workshops for various communities. She also teaches postulants at Kilgoris. Sister Mara Frundt is a pastoral minister at Kiptere, our new mission in the Diocese of Kericho. She does this ministry in addition to be SSND Vocation Director. Sister Janet Crane (SL) is involved in pastoral ministry, especially AIDS ministry, in Nairobi. Sister Jane Akelo, who is in the process of transfer to SSND, is trained in pastoral ministry and has done various forms of pastoral ministry before coming to our congregation. At present Sister Rose Ngacha is pursuing a degree in Social Ministry and Novice Gladys Manani is a nurse.

Placement in Kenya was usually done together at an Area Meeting, often with a Provincial Council member laying out the names of the missions and the Sisters on the floor for all to consider together. This experience of communal discernment, looking at the needs of each place, each person and each community together led to great generosity and ownership on the part of Sisters. It helped many to let go of a loved place and ministry and say, "Here I am. Send me."

The Kenya Area held most funds in common. The Mankato Province supported the ministries of the sisters for the most part. Also Sister Eunice was a great fund raiser, and as time went along, part of her role in the area was development, along with serving as teacher, mentor and librarian at St. Paul's Teacher Training College in Nyabururu. From early on she and all the Sisters in Kenya worked with the Mankato development office to keep the story of SSND in Kenya before the eyes of Sisters and donors in the U.S.

When Kenya began to look at receiving Kenyan women into the community, we found that stability was a more necessary value. The women asked, "Where is your place?" We needed to put down some permanent roots. During 1990 the Formation House for postulants was built on property overlooking Lake Victoria outside of Kisumu. Sister Kathryn Berger, Area Leader and Headmistress at Ojolla at the time, oversaw the building of the house. Sister Mary Kerber was the first postulant director in Kenya.

In 1994 Mary was called by NAMA to become the Interim Coordinator to carry out the dialogue, communication, and planning for the new District of Africa. At that time Mary moved to Ghana and Sister Sylvia Borgmeier came from the novitiate in Ghana to be Postulant Director in Kenya.

The climate at Kisumu is hot and dry for the most part. The soil is rocky and rainfall tends to be sporadic.

In 1989 a decision was made by the North American Provincials to open an East African Interprovincial Novitiate in Kenya. The opening of the West African Novitiate had been approved earlier and it opened in 1991. Sister Roxanne Schares was appointed Novice Director for East Africa. She was asked to look for suitable location for the novitiate in Nairobi. For many months she looked for a house and land to buy. Finally, she found a house on Kingara Road in a new Nairobi parish near Dagoretti Corner on the edge of one of the poor parts of the city. The property had space for an addition to be built on to the home that was already there. The first novices, Mary Masanta and Joyce Nyakwama began their novitiate there on January 23, 1993. The addition was completed and the site blessed by Cardinal Otunga on August 31, 1994. Sister Maris Simon became part of the Novitiate Community, continued with her work as Vocation Director and worked part time in the new Dagoretti Parish. As time went on Sister Kylene Bodum from the Wilton Province followed by Sister Claret Feldhake from the St. Louis Province were part of the novitiate community. Since both the Novitiate in Ghana and in Nairobi were funded by NAMA and Novitiate programs were designed by the Interprovincial Formation Committee and approved by NAMA, they presented some challenges as to how they might be included in the life of the Area in which they were located. As the District of Africa came into being, it seemed important to have only one novitiate. In 1998 the East African Novitiate was closed and became fully a House of Studies for SSND students. Currently students are from Kenya and Nigeria, along with Sister Mary Kerber, teacher at Tangaza College, and Sister Janet Crane who is a pastoral minister.

In 1997 the search began for a second secondary school for SSND in Kenya. After a committee had identified three possible places, Sisters visited them, prayed and dialogued about pros and cons of each. At a weekend of Area discernment Kiptere in the Kericho Diocese was chosen. The original school buildings were built on the parish compound and the Sisters lived in three small

huts near the school. Sister Michael Marie Laux was the first headmistress. Sister Joyce Nyakwama, teacher, and sister Mara Frundt, pastoral minister and SSND vocation director made up the original community at Kiptere. The new bishop of Kericho felt that the location of the secondary school on such a small parish compound was not suitable, given the governments penchant for taking over good private schools on occasion. Kiltegan Fathers Brian Treacy and Ted Smythe have been very supportive of the school and are very concerned about evangelization in St. Francis parish, which is vast but has few Catholics. This school has been built entirely with donations, primarily from a parish in Plano, Texas where Father Ted's brother, now deceased, had been pastor. The convent was built also through Father Ted with the exception of the solar lighting system, the water tank and the water system. Father Ted now feels that his part of building the school is finished and it must take on its own maintenance costs and do fund raising to build a library and make other improvements needed in the future. Like Gekano, Kiptere has no electricity or telephone except for some solar lighting in the convent and rectory. Also, like Gekano, the climate is cool with sufficient rainfall. Both Gekano and Kiptere can be maintained by school fees, but will continue to need help through grants or fund raising for major improvements as most private schools do.

The need for Sisters at Gekano and Kiptere who will teach in the secondary school has taken on crisis proportions. Also, the Kenyan Sisters feel a great need to be mentored in living religious life by older, more experienced Sisters for more years before they must carry the responsibility for SSND formation on their own.

In 2001 Kenya has five houses: Nyabururu, Gekano, Kiptere, the Formation House in Kisumu and the House of Studies in Nairobi. SSND owns both the land and the houses in Nairobi and in Kisumu. SSND owns the buildings on the property in Nyabururu. The School Sisters of Notre Dame are legally incorporated in Kenya. Since this is a broad sketch of SSND in Kenya, not all Sisters or short term ministries have been mentioned.