

## Ghana

History of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in the Countries of Africa  
Elizabeth Newman, SSND

The unanimous decision to send sisters to the diocese of Accra in Ghana, West Africa, was greeted with song, applause and tears at the provincial assembly on January 21, 1973. The members and observers broke into song, recognizing the presence of the Spirit falling afresh on the province; they applauded, knowing that the decision was the result of careful research and prayerful discernment; they had tears of joy but also tears of sadness, realizing that the province could not then respond to an invitation to send Sisters to the diocese of Makeni in Sierra Leone.

Mother Georgianne Segner had received an invitation from Bishop Azzolini in Sierra Leone prior to the General Chapter of 1972. The invitation was to work with the Italian Xaverian priests in Port Loco in the diocese of Makeni. Knowing that the Dallas province seemed to be ready to share in the work of so many other SSND missionaries throughout the world, Mother Georgianne presented the invitation to Sister Warin Valoni, provincial leader of the Dallas province, with the suggestion that the Dallas delegates to the General Chapter may want to visit Africa after the chapter meeting. Then, an invitation came also from Bishop Andoh of the diocese of Accra, Ghana, through Fr. Clem Hotze, S.V.D. the district leader of the Society of the Divine Word. The invitation was to work with the S.V.D. Fathers and Brothers in and around Nsawam in the diocese of Accra.

Sisters Warin Valoni, Jane Desaulniers and Wonda Potts went from Rome to the two countries to visit the bishops, the specific places of ministry, and the religious in charge of those ministries. The report to the province and assembly members included their impressions of need, opportunities of working with experienced missionaries, possible living quarters, attitude toward community and the existing political climate and position of expatriates. At the assembly, the members realized that the needs in both places were great, but the deciding factor for Ghana was the presence of American missionaries and the opportunity for expanded religious community and support, especially because this was the province's first missionary extension.

Sixteen Sisters responded to the invitation issued to the Sisters of the province. From these the provincial council chose Sisters Mary Ann Matachinskas, Elizabeth Newman, Bernice Orchnel, Sylvia Provost and Paulette Strakos. These Sisters spent several months in preparation before their departure

ceremony on February 2, 1974, and their departure for Rome on February 4. Mother Georgianne and Sister Henriette Hoene traveled to Ghana with the Sisters on February 11, 1974.

The Sisters took up their residence on one floor of an SVD building in Nsawam, Ghana, until a house was prepared on the campus. The original plan was that Bernice was to open and run a medical clinic, Sisters Elizabeth and Sylvia were to teach at St. Martin Secondary School, Paulette and Mary Ann would do pastoral work in a parish at Nsawam. In actuality, because of a change in the pastor of the parish, Mary Ann went to work for the National Secretariat and Paulette taught religious education and later worked at the Catholic Press in Accra. Bernice had to have surgery and was unable to begin her clinic the first year. The headmaster of the school was also changed; so, after the first year Elizabeth joined the staff at the Orthopedic Center and Sylvia returned to the States.

Sister Elizabeth was named the first SSND leader in Ghana and was the liaison with the provincial leader in Dallas from 1974 – 1981. Sister Joan Schaefer was the area coordinator from 1981 to 1986, Mary Busson from 1987 -1993, Cecilia Gros from 1993-1995 and Mary Kerber, MK, interim African coordinator from 1995-1997. During the early years, the Sisters received small salaries but were supported mainly by the province. Later, the salaries became better, but the province continued to supplement the income and underwrite other expenses.

From the beginning until the formation of the SSND District of Africa in 1997, new ministries evolved for the Sisters in Nsawam, Accra, Sunyani and Cape Coast, as they responded to acknowledged needs and to the requests of Bishops of the developing Ghanaian Church. During these years, the Sisters of the Dallas province were joined by Sisters from other SSND provinces and also by a Holy Spirit Sister. A number of Sisters who had to leave war-torn Sierra Leone and Liberia came to serve in Ghana, sometimes with refugees and often in the province ministries in Ghana.

In Nsawam, Notre Dame Clinic was started as a mobile unit in 1975 by Sister Bernice Orscheln to care for the medical needs of people in small villages. Because a law required that mobile clinics be connected with a static clinic; two rooms in CYO building were used as a 18-year temporary site for the clinic. A grant from Misereor in Germany made it possible to renovate an old school building into an attractive and functional permanent clinic in 1991. Besides Sisters Bernice and Cecilia Gros, who followed her as a Senior Nursing Officer, Sisters who ministered in the clinic were Sisters Jo Murray, SHSp, Lorrta Verhey, SSND (CH), Miguela Keller, O.P., and Viky Swanzy-Essien. Well trained Ghanaians have served on the staff and continue at present the quality health care of the clinic.

St. Martin School, run by the SVD at Nsawam, had the services at different times of Sisters Elizabeth, Sylvia Provost and Joan Schaefer. The school had been a school for boys, but in time girls who were day students could attend also.

The Orthopedic Centre at Nsawam, founded by Brother Tarcisius DeRuyter in 1961, is a centre for persons with all kind of orthopedic problems. They are fitted with whatever is needed to help them and are trained to use the aids. Children are housed at the Centre and have academic lessons while in residence. Sister Elizabeth served as Directress of Education for fourteen years. Other Sisters who served there were Donna Duhaon, Joan Schaefer, Maureen Riley, Elis Viebeck BY, and Marguerite Mary Bunter WI.

The Catholic Conference Centre on the SVD compound in Nsawam hosts religious and lay groups for meetings and spiritual development. Both Sisters Joan Schaefer and Joan Van Beek MI, served as co-director of the Centre, each for a number of years. Sisters in Nsawam also taught religion at the parishes and held services at the women's prison.

In 1985 the Sisters hosted a significant SSND event in Nsawam when the Extended General Council met there from September 8 to October 2. The general council, the provincial and regional leaders and extensive staff became acquainted with Ghanaian culture through organized experiences.

In Accra, SSND served the Church in national and diocesan offices. They began living there in 1980. Sister Mary Ann served as a Religious Education secretary at the National Catholic Secretariat and later as diocesan Director of Religious Education. Sister Paulette served with the Accra Catholic press, Sister Regina Cotter as Assistant in Publications for the National Catholic Secretariat, and Sister Mary Jo Hofmeier as Director of Religious Education.

The Diocese of Sunyani has also benefited from the presence of SSND and there have been significant developments there since 1986. Already in 1983 Bishop James Owusu and other native leaders had written to Sister Jacqueline Merz, Provincial Leader, inviting the School Sisters of Notre Dame to open a Catholic secondary school for young women because of the great need and desire for the education of women. Before responding to the invitation, the provincial council asked the provincial assembly to choose between the girls' school in Sunyani and a hostel for girls at St. Martin School in Nsawam. The assembly chose the Sunyani ministry. Sister Jackie and later Sister Dorez Mehrtens, Provincial Leader, negotiated with the Bishop who had acquired land for the school but could offer only a vacated building for the beginning years.

The building was renovated and in 1987 Notre Dame Secondary School opened, and from a small beginning the school developed quickly. Its reputation for solid learning and training grew. However, the new school was not completed until January of 1996. Sisters Joan Schaefer and Joan Bellew served as

headmistresses as well as teachers. Sisters who served as teachers and staff were Dorothy Ann Balsler, Julie Brady, Mary Busson, Marie Therese Nowakowski ML, Maureen Riley, Mary Leonora Tucker WI, Kathleen Wahl WI, Mary Andre Aubuchon SL, Barbara Ann Brunsmann SL, Elis Vieback BV and Vivian Zoller CA.

Before the school was built, SSND building projects had been undertaken and completed. Sister Mary Busson was the SSND contact with the builders of the interprovincial novitiate, the formation house, and the new school, in that order.

After Sister Mary Margaret Johanning, General Superior, had directed that African women could be accepted into the congregation only if provinces would make a commitment to remain in the respective countries for twenty-five years, the Sisters began to make plans concerning formation of interested women. In the 1984 African assembly in Liberia, the Sisters worked on common principles of formation and Sister Mary Margaret initiated a discussion of a place for the West African novitiate. After the assembly she visited Sunyani and the land which Bishop Owusu had secured for a novitiate. After the decision was made by the American provincials to have the novitiate there, the building was begun in 1990 and completed in 1992. Sister Marie Antoinette Naumann SL, was named novice director. Sisters who have assisted Antoinette were Germanus Bauer SL, Sylvia Borgmeier MK, Petronilla Killegre WI, and Laurellen Nixon WI.

Meanwhile, African women were in various stages of formation in Ghana. The need for a larger residence for them and for some of the Sisters occasioned the building of a Formation House. This was completed in 1993. Sisters who have served as formation personnel have been Marie Therese Nowakowski ML, Julie Brady, Mary Ann Matachinskis, and Joan Schaefer. A happy event was the profession of the first Ghanaian SSND, Sister Vicky Swanzy-Essien, May 6, 1995.

In Sunyani, also, Sister Dorez Mehrrens served on the staff of the Diocesan Retreat Center, 1996-1999.

In 1990, at the invitation of Archbishop John Kodwo Amissah of Cape Coast, the SSNDs began planning for a Catholic elementary school in Cape Coast, to be named Mary Queen of Peace Catholic School and to open for the school year 1991-1992. Two weeks before the school was to open, the Archbishop died from a car accident. Seventy students began classes that year, and gradually the buildings and the enrollment increased. Sister Mary Ann Matachinskis has been the headmistress; Sisters teaching there have been Dorothy Ann Balsler and Gloria Marie Foret.

In Cape Coast, Sister Joan Marie Van Beek served as Religious Education Organizer for the Cape Coast Education Office.

When the District of Africa was erected in 1997, the office for the District was located at Nsawam, Ghana, which is, since 1993, in the diocese of Koforidua. This historical sketch covers only facts before the beginning of the District of Africa.