

# SSND to Liberia, West Africa

1970 - 1992

## The Northeastern Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, 2005

by Kay O'Connell, SSND

### ***“Spirited” Call and Response***

The story of SSND ministry in Africa begins in Brooklyn, New York, at St. Saviour Convent on a Sunday afternoon in spring, May 4, 1969. That day Father John Feeney, African Mission Father born in Ireland, came to visit a family friend, Sister Sean Maura Killilea. During their visit in the convent parlor, several sisters joined Sean to hear Father Feeney talk about Christ the King, the parish he had founded in Zwedru (Tchien), Liberia, West Africa in 1958.<sup>i</sup>

Sisters at St. Saviour at that time describe the parish as “Spirit-filled,” deeply inspired by the vision of Vatican II. Parishioners constantly consulted the documents of the Council, asking what they meant in the setting of Park Slope, Brooklyn. Laity, sisters and priests joined wholeheartedly in dialogue, going into homes for family liturgies, as well as prayer, reflection, Bible study, sacramental preparation and planning.

Similar ferment was moving religious life as it was lived at the SSND motherhouse in Wilton, Connecticut, about 50 miles away. The 12 years of the founding provincialate, Mother Paschal, Sisters Emmanuel and Theodora, were just coming to an end. Sister M. Petronilla Killigrew was about to be elected the second provincial of the Northeastern Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

At the congregation’s generalate in Rome, Mother M. Georgianne Segner was in her first year as superior general. The congregation was in between the two sessions of the “special” general chapter that *Perfectae Caritatis* had mandated for all religious congregations. Sisters were living under *Interim Directives* that preceded the first version of *You Are Sent*. It was a time when new winds of the Spirit were blowing, when renewed hearts could feel them, and new leaders could risk where they would lead. In a letter to native African SSNDs some thirty years later, Helen Reed, one of the first four missionaries, states, “We came (to Africa) in the manner that God, the Holy Spirit, had determined. It was out of our hands.” All these decades later, the missionaries all remember a sense of being, in Helen’s words, literally “pushed by the Spirit.”

As Father Feeney spoke of the educational needs of his people in the “high bush” of Tchien (Zwedru), Liberia, four aspects of his description found a deep resonance in the sisters who had gathered—education, the poor, women, and needs not served by others. Father Feeney spoke of the impossibility of any young girl’s getting an education because she would usually become pregnant early in her teens. There was

already a school in Tchien, called St. Philomena's, attended almost exclusively by boys. The SMA Fathers envisioned further training of the Liberian teachers (some of whom were not high school graduates), and a girls house on the mission where young women could live and study. "Feeney," as the sisters later came to call him, had not come to St. Saviour formally to present a need or a request for sisters. He was just a very interesting visitor through whom the Spirit spoke, compellingly. (Or in retrospect, was he a quietly clever Irishman?)

That evening, sisters in the St. Saviour community room were filling out the index cards offered annually by the provincial council as a way of volunteering for the missions (Puerto Rico and Chile, at that time), and also for inner city work. No one remembers who said it, but someone voiced the thought, "We've volunteered for all those other places, why don't we volunteer for the place that each one of us feels is where we really should go?" Four sisters added Liberia to the list, and signed their names: Marie Daniel (Mary) Dooley, Sean Maura Killilea, M. Maelisa (Helen) Reed, and Nicholas Mary Brennick. A while later, Sister M. Delphine (Kathleen) Wahl, inspired by an invitation from Sister Petronilla, joined the first group of prospective missionaries to Africa, and Sister Nicholas Mary decided to apply instead for an experimental community being proposed for inner-city Rochester, New York.<sup>ii</sup>

A day or so later, Helen wrote to the new provincialate to explain the index cards, while Sean Maura told Father Feeney about them and requested that the SMA Fathers present a proposal. Immediately Father Philip C. Bagnasco, SMA provincial superior, wrote Mother Paschal a letter that is a masterpiece of expressing a pressing need. It was dated May 7, 1969, eleven days before Mother completed her second term as first provincial of the Wilton province.<sup>iii</sup>

Father writes of having visited some 282 American mothers general and provincials, and his plans to see 98 more by the end of the summer, and then states, "I still do not have a single sister for our people." He calls this letter an updated version of a previous request sent to Mother (and possibly to all the American provincials) at the special general chapter held in Rome the previous October. Father Bagnasco, describing himself as a "pest," and "desperate" asks, "Could you start by loaning us two sisters to work and live with the Bernardines (Franciscan Sisters) in Cape Palmas with a view to opening your own place later when the number could be augmented?"

After her installation on May 18, 1969, Sister Petronilla was greeted by "Maisie," Helen Reed, in the receiving line in the gym at Wilton. Helen remembers saying, "Sister, are you going to let us go to Africa?" Sister Petronilla describes herself as answering typically, "Well, we'll see, Sister." Then, Helen (alone) recalls, she added with a smile, "We can't say no to the Spirit, can we?" Encounters such as this would soon turn the new provincial council's thoughts urgently to the place settled by freed slaves from the United States during the Monroe presidency. Starting in 1820, 20,000 had arrived. Liberia declared itself an independent republic on July 26, 1847, five days before Mother Theresa arrived in New York with her band of missionaries. The new nation expressed its origin in its name and called its capital city Monrovia.

Excitement continued high in the St. Saviour community; some evenings as many as 15 sisters gathered to discuss going to Africa. Sister John Gualbert (Madeline) Conway, the community leader, would later become Wilton's first mission coordinator and do a huge amount of work to support the new mission. At that time, as a member of the Committee on Experimentation, Madeline read a proposal to the newly-formed provincial chapter, written by the hope-filled missionaries; she remembers that it produced first amazed laughter and only later serious consideration.

Letters and a copy of the proposal to Mother Georgianne in Rome followed. Both superior general and new provincial leader seemed initially to have felt that the needs of the Wilton province and its mission territories, Chile and Puerto Rico, had already stretched thin the resources of the still young province. But the two leaders talked together at length that summer during the 1969 SSND Educational Conference in Mankato. Here both felt the power of the Holy Spirit moving the congregation strongly toward a new continent.

Sisters Helen and Marie Daniel received "obediences" to Miramar, Puerto Rico, that June. Helen had been there before, but for Marie Daniel it was an opportunity to test her ability to adapt to another culture in the tropics, while their "impossible dream" was under consideration. Mother Georgianne visited them there in October 1969, and saw Sister Petronilla toward the end of the year. Both expressed their encouragement and strong respect for the power of the Spirit working in individual sisters.

By December 30, 1969, Father Kevin Scanlon, by now the new provincial of the American SMA province based in Tenafly, New Jersey, wrote to Sisters Helen and Marie Daniel:

We have often heard that the grace of God works in mysterious ways and yesterday when I visited with Sister Petronilla in Wilton, I saw it for myself! We are simply delighted that your proposal to work on the missions in Liberia is soon to become a reality. Sister Petronilla gives her complete approval and tells me that Mother Georgianne is also very enthusiastic. All of us see it as a definite pointing of the finger of God in a new direction. This news will give all the missionaries in Liberia a great lift.

In late February 1970, Father Scanlon also visited Puerto Rico and spoke with Marie Daniel and Helen about four possible mission stations in Liberia. Sister Helen Reed noted in a letter to family and friends at that time that he also told them that it "might be helpful to the people if you dress in some uniform way. They are very simple people and might be confused by a variety of clothing. The only sisters they have ever seen in Monrovia dress in long white habits."

## ***Personal Commitments***

In the meantime parishioners at St. Saviour started a "St. Saviour in Liberia Fund" as a way of showing their growing vision of the universal Church, and their willingness to share the wealth of sister-educators they had enjoyed since 1909 in their parish. The basic agreement with Most Rev. Nicholas Grimley, D.D., Bishop of Cape Palmas, concerning temporalities stated that the four sisters would make a personal commitment to work with the SMA Fathers for five years. Bishop Grimley, himself an SMA Father from Ireland, promised to be responsible for the upkeep of the sisters with suitable living quarters, an automobile, and a monthly stipend of \$100 per sister.

With this and the generosity of St. Saviour parishioners and many others, the sisters sustained themselves, met many pressing needs of the people of Tchien, and built the first girls house on the mission. Many sisters throughout the province also had fundraisers for Liberia in their classrooms and Helen's many former students in Puerto Rico ran several cocktail parties in Miramar during the year that she was there.

It was not until June 1974 that then-provincial Sister Virginia Sebert proposed to the Wilton provincial chapter that the commitment of our sisters to the Church in Liberia become a provincial, rather than a personal, commitment. This possibility had been suggested by Mother Georgianne after her first visit there. The proposal passed unanimously, and the province assumed responsibility for the sisters' personal needs, including airfare home. The \$100 stipend continued the responsibility of the SMA Fathers, along with funds needed to run the mission itself.

## ***Missioning and Departure***

Along with hundreds of excited SSNDs, on October 11, 1970, over 150 St. Saviour parishioners attended the departure ceremony for the missionaries in the chapel at Wilton. A few nights before, they had feted "our missionaries" at a joyous party in the parish. At the departure liturgy concelebrated by ten priests, Sister Petronilla presented the four sisters as missionaries, and Father Feeney gave them their mission crosses. Father P. Fursey O'Toole, pastoral associate at St. Saviour, preached the homily.

Amid much excitement (and with their stateroom decked with myriad flowers and cases of champagne left over from the parish party), Sisters Marie Daniel and Helen sailed on a freighter on October 20. A sister from St. Saviour, who did not sign her name, wrote in 1975:

I can remember standing on the wharf of the Farrell Lines in Brooklyn and watching the African STAR glide away from the dock into the darkness of the night. As the echo of the well wishers singing the 'Ave Maris Stella' and the 'Salve, Regina' grew fainter

and fainter, only then did I realize that SSND in Africa had become a reality.

In December, Sister Helen Reed wrote from Africa:

We arrived in Africa on November 2, 1970, after having spent 13 days crossing the Atlantic. Even though we had several days of rough seas and rocking of the ship, we are still glad we traveled that way. It was a very valuable, enjoyable experience. Before we arrived at Monrovia, we spent a day each at Dakar in Senegal, Conakry in Guinea, and Freetown, Sierra Leone, so we had a general introduction to the geography and people of West Africa.

When we sailed into Monrovia we were met by the Bishop (Grimley), three priests and three (Bernardine) sisters.

### ***First Steps in Liberia***

Days of visiting the SMA Fathers' missions followed, after which the two SSNDs were driven ten hours over the dirt road to Tchien to be greeted by a welcoming crowd of students, teachers and prominent townspeople, bearing gifts of flowers and chickens. Since the convent wasn't ready, Pastor Larry (Laurier) Haines, SMA, moved the sisters into the priests' house, while he moved to an African mud hut. Lack of window screens and only kerosene lamps for lighting sent the newcomers to bed in the early darkness under mosquito nets. At the first light when they rose at the crowing of roosters, they found people waiting in the main room of the rectory, which doubled as an office/clinic.

In Liberia, which is very near the equator, activity, they quickly learned, is governed by sunrise at 6 a.m. and sunset at 6 p.m. Chloroquine to ward off malaria had already become their daily medication although, in time, just about everyone in Liberia, including the missionaries, suffered periodically from this indigenous disease.

For the first Christmas, Helen made life-sized figures for a creche to be placed near the road in front of the Church which was the main thoroughfare into Zwedru. The figures, made of cloth brought from Brooklyn and stuffed with native grass, were studied and wondered at by all who passed by. And so the Christmas story that first year was told to some who had never heard it. Although Father Feeney had evangelized many, and there were Assembly of God missionaries and Baptist clergy in town, most of the people of Tchien at that time practiced tribal religion, while the members of the Mandingo tribe, who carried themselves with a tall, stately bearing, were Muslims. The sisters learned that the people in general had a very deep sense of God's presence in life and in all that happened. Most of the time, the peoples' conversation, whether things were going well or ill, began with "I thank God." They also held a very strong belief that "God's time is best." Years later, the sisters all recall how deeply inspired they often were by this indigenous spirituality.

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<sup>i</sup> The names Tchien and Zwedru are interchangeable, the latter being the more formal.

<sup>ii</sup> A note on the names of the four sisters since all have undergone changes since 1970: *Mary Dooley*, Sister Marie Daniel, is also called “Marie,” “Sister Mahree,” “Mary” and “Dooley” in this manuscript.

*Catherine Killilea*, Sister Sean Maura, is called “Sean” and also “Seannie.” She is now Mrs. Bill Dietz and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

*Helen Reed*, Sister Mary Maelisa, is called “Maelisa,” and also “Maisie.”

*Kathleen Wahl*, Sister Mary Delphine, is called “Delphine,” and also “Dellie.”

<sup>iii</sup> In late 1998, Sister Helen Reed brought together in a large, red loose-leaf binder a great many documents related to the founding of SSND in Liberia. Included among these documents are the chronicles of the two houses—Tchien and Monrovia. Much of the information in this account can be found in these chronicles, according to date, or elsewhere in Helen’s book, which is kept in the Heritage Room archives in Wilton. Beyond this indication, no attempt is made in this account to footnote every statement.

I am very grateful to Helen for collecting and organizing so much material. It was a great help in this writing. In September 1998, Helen sent one copy of this red binder to the Interprovincial Novitiate in Sunyani, Ghana, and another to the Heritage Room of the District of Africa. She included a letter to our native African sisters, expressing her desire that they know precisely how the Holy Spirit inspired the first missionaries to go to the continent of Africa. She wrote, “You have no idea how the very thought of your existence, our young African sisters, fills me with joy and gratitude to God who has wrought such wonders for us.”

Other information, especially the stories about mission life, are the personal recollections of the missionaries, which the present writer recorded in oral interviews during the fall of 2000. These audio microtapes are dated and are also in the Heritage Room at Wilton