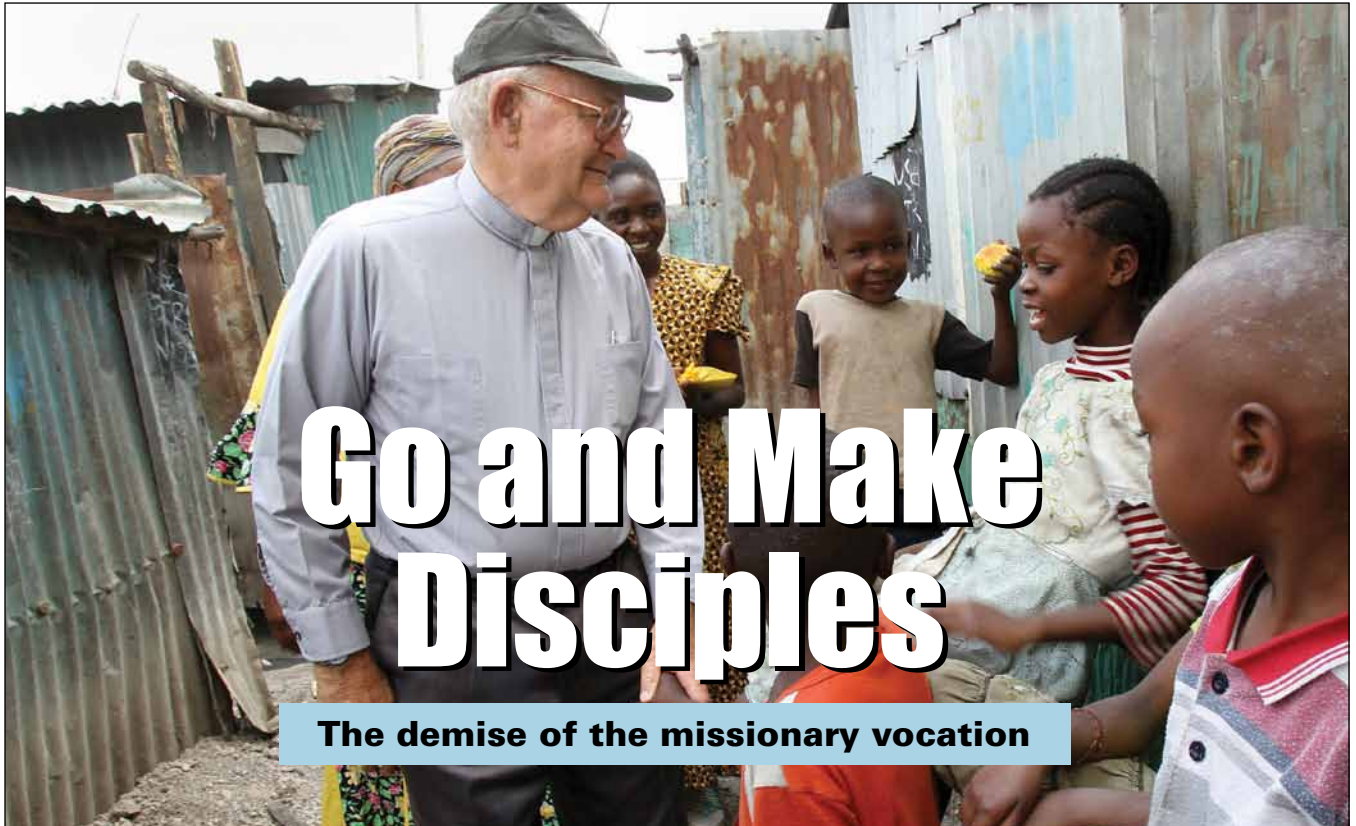


CNS



Go and Make Disciples

The demise of the missionary vocation

Maryknoll Father John Lange as he visits sick residents in Mukuru Kwa Njenga slum in Nairobi, Kenya, Feb. 13.

By Jeff Ziegler

At 5:00 each morning, Father Mike Snyder rises and prays before the Blessed Sacrament. At 6:30, he offers Mass at his university's chapel; he spends most of the rest of his day meeting and praying with students, visiting the sick at a local hospital, and performing mundane office tasks.

Ordained in 1979, Father Snyder has ministered in Tanzania for decades and now works as the Catholic chaplain at Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS), the national medical university. The university is located in Dar es Salaam, a city of 3.2 million and the nation's capital.

Tanzania is among the world's poorest nations; the life expectancy is 53. According to Vatican statistics, 30 percent of the nation's 41 million people are Catholic. The US State Department estimates that 35 percent of Tanzanians are Muslim and 35 percent retain indigenous beliefs.

Whether Tanzania will be predominantly Catholic or Muslim in a century is an open question. Addressing the Synod of Bishops for Africa in 2009, Archbishop Norbert Mtega of Songea warned of "the Islamic monetary factor, whereby huge sums of money from outside countries are being poured in our countries to destabilize peace in our countries and to eradicate Christianity."

At MUHAS, half of the 1,600 students are Catholic. Father Snyder told CWR that his ministry's greatest successes "lie in seeing these gifted young people—the intelligentsia of Tanzania—take responsibility for the operations of the Catholic student community...I would say 50 percent are active in our community. I am able to train them in leadership skills while seeking out ways to assist them in developing their faith. We organize regular retreats and seminars for the students and always have excellent turnouts."

"My visits among the sick are also often rewarding as they show the depth of their faith and hope in Jesus through the patient endurance they display

during this time of illness," he adds. "So often I walk away realizing that I have come in contact with the face of Christ through them."

Father Snyder's work is not without its disappointments and challenges. "The disappointments lie in the lack of good medical facilities," he notes. "Muhimbili is probably the best-equipped hospital in the country, but there is still so much lacking. Also, the corruption rampant throughout the country is a disappointment."

"Challenges lie in motivating our medical students to remain in Tanzania after graduation," he says. "So many are lured to attractive jobs outside the country and others to lucrative employment inside the country but outside the medical sector. There is just one medical doctor for 28,000 Tanzanians and one nurse for every hundred hospital patients. Medical salaries in government service are much lower than in other fields."

Father Snyder is part of a rapidly dwindling breed: he is an American missionary priest.

PLENTIFUL HARVEST, FEW LABORERS

The Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, of which Father Snyder is a member, were founded by the US bishops in 1911 as the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America. Today, the average Maryknoller is 74 years old; the order's vocation director is 80. According to various editions of the United States Catholic Mission Association's handbook, 158 Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers now serve abroad—down from 279 in 2004.

The challenges that the Maryknollers face in attracting new missionaries are not unique. In 1968, the United States had 282 diocesan priests, 3,715 religious priests, 869 brothers, 4,150 sisters, 208 seminarians, and 419 laity serving as missionaries; those numbers

rector of the Pontifical Mission Societies in New Zealand, concurs. "Interest in missionary vocations or in any religious or priestly vocations is restricted to very few," he says. "The mission societies like the Marists and Columbans have only single figures in study."

At the same time, missionary vocations from Asia and Africa are relatively numerous, allowing some missionary orders to expand. With 6,131 members, the Society of the Divine Word is now the sixth-largest religious institute for men, surpassing the Dominicans and the Redemptorists, "and the only one of the top 10 to have consistently grown over the past 40 years," says Theresa Carson, public and media relations director of the order's Chicago province. Divine Word Father Stephen Bevans, professor of mission and cul-

The decline in missionary vocations extends throughout the Western world. "We have not received vocations to the missionary priesthood from any of our English-speaking countries (Ireland, England, the US, Australia, and New Zealand) for a number of years, although lay missionaries continue to enrich our numbers from these countries," says Father Bob Mosher, a Nebraska-based Columban missionary priest who served for decades in Chile.

have since fallen to 68 diocesan priests, 784 religious priests, 171 brothers, 1,962 sisters, nine seminarians, and 358 laity. Remarkably, 48 percent of these US missionaries are now based in the United States, either in retirement or doing administrative or pastoral work.

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Marist Father Paul Shannahan, di-

rector at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, cites "the large crop of vocations in Asia, especially in Indonesia." Father Mosher observes that "the Columban Fathers, like most other missionary congregations and societies of apostolic life, have experienced a surge in mission vocations from the Philippines, Korea, Fiji, Chile, [and] Peru."

"Very clearly there is a decline of lifelong missionary vocations *ad gentes* [to non-Christian peoples] if we talk of Europe and North America," Father Socrates Mesiona, director of the Pontifical Mission Societies in the Philippines, told CWR. "The vocation situation for mission *ad gentes* in South America, Africa, and Asia has remained the same, if not improved, for the last two decades.... My estimate is that [in the Philippines] there are more or less a hundred new missionaries every year, men and women combined," not counting lay missionaries.

The demise of the missionary vocation in the West has occurred despite the intense interest in the missions

shown by the popes since Pope Benedict XV issued his landmark encyclical *Maxime Illud* in 1919. Pope Pius XII begged the world's bishops to send diocesan priests to African dioceses in



Father Eduardo Montemayor, a member of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity from Corpus Christi, Texas, anoints a woman waiting to have cataract surgery at the medical clinic in early June in San Pablo, Ecuador.

his 1951 encyclical *Fidei Donum*; in the ensuing decades, 1,300 French priests ministered in Africa. As African vocations surged and Western vocations plummeted, the generosity was reciprocated—in 2005, more than 1,000 African priests were ministering in French parishes.

In his 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*—sometimes called the Magna Carta of Catholic teaching on the missions—Blessed John Paul II said that the time was ripe for a new evangelization of once-Christian nations and a reinvigorated mission *ad gentes*. "The number of those who do not know Christ and do not belong to the Church is constantly on the increase," he lamented. "When we consider this immense portion of humanity which is loved by the Father and for whom he sent his Son, the urgency of the Church's mission is obvious."

Emphasizing that “salvation can only come from Jesus Christ,” the late pope sought to correct certain trends in missionary work, including a secularized misinterpretation of the concept of the Kingdom of God. “Proclamation is the permanent priority of mission,” he taught, adding:

The Church cannot elude Christ’s explicit mandate, nor deprive men and women of the “Good News” about their being loved and saved by God. The proclamation of the Word of God has *Christian conversion* as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith.... Nowadays the call to conversion which missionaries address to non-Christians is put into question or passed over in silence. It is seen as an act of “proselytizing”; it is claimed that it is enough to help people to become more human or more faithful to their own religion, that it is enough to build communities capable of working for justice, freedom, peace, and solidarity. What is overlooked is that every person has the right to hear the “Good News” of the God who reveals and gives himself in Christ.

Echoing Blessed John Paul, Pope Benedict XVI told directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies on May 14 that “only if we are rooted profoundly in Christ and in his word are we capable of withstanding the temptation to reduce evangelization to a purely human, social project, hiding or glossing over the transcendent dimension of the salvation offered by God in Christ.”

Pope John Paul’s concerns are “still valid and important,” says Father Mesiona, for some missionaries have tended “to dilute or tone-down proclamation in favor of other concerns.” He adds, “What makes a missionary distinct from any person of good will is that he or she has the Gospel with him or her—that needs to be proclaimed. And this Gospel has to be proclaimed because people have the right to hear it. Whether people will accept or reject it is another story. But the Gospel has to be proclaimed in word and deed!”

The need for missionaries to non-Christian regions is more acute than at any time in the Church’s history. The number of non-Christians has swelled to 4.6 billion, including 1.52 billion Muslims, 935 million Hindus, and 484 million Buddhists. (In comparison,

nearly 1.18 billion of the world’s 6.9 billion people are Catholic, 274 million are Orthodox, and some 800 million are Protestant.)

CAUSES OF THE COLLAPSE

A loss of faith, the needs of local dioceses, a lack of awareness of the missions, and concerns about fidelity to the teaching of the Church have contributed to the loss of vocations to missionary institutes, according to missionaries who spoke with CWR.

“I would have to say that the decline in the number of lifelong missionary vocations is something of a mystery,” says Father Kevin Hanlon, a mission educator and promoter for the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers. “How is it that the most important work the Church can do, that of teaching and baptizing the nations, is now considered just one ancillary work among many, one sort of ministry among others? ... [The] lack of faith that popes from the time of Paul VI onward have referred to is perhaps the greatest reason for a decline in all vocations, including the missionary one.”

“We have 13 men in formation today with four more joining us this fall,” Father Snyder adds. “Young people are

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coming to Maryknoll, but not like the hundreds that came to us 60 years ago.”

“The US Church has become much more inward-looking,” says Father Ken Mazur, North American regional superior of the PIME (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions) Missionaries. “Many in authority within the Church are more concerned about their own needs—obviously—and less about the needs of the global Church. If a bishop doesn’t have enough priests for his own parishes, he is less likely to encourage vocations to the missions *ad gentes*....

Concerns about the orthodoxy of some missionary institutes may also be deterring young men and women from a missionary vocation. Father Mazur told *CWR* that “one of our seminarians, who studies at the local diocesan seminary, says that many diocesan seminarians look at him as different, or perhaps ‘unorthodox.’ Perhaps the impression is that missionaries don’t follow the guidelines of the Vatican?”

These concerns have affected the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers. The most famous living Maryknoll priest

70s and the 80s, the social and charitable activities we do on the mission fields,” Father Hanlon adds. “Or we spoke more of the Church’s postconciliar work of dialogue with other religions. While these were good things to do, they did give the mistaken impression to some that the preaching of the Gospel, something we have never ceased to do, was taking a back seat. Especially in this last decade, we have sought to assure people, especially the young who consider this vocation, that this is still, and has always been, principally an ecclesial work of making Christ known to all people.”

A landmark 2009 study conducted by the Center for the Applied Research in the Apostolate for the National Religious Vocation Conference may offer solutions to the collapse of vocations to many missionary institutes in the West. The study found that “[t]he most successful institutes in terms of attracting and retaining new members at this time are those that follow a more traditional style of religious life in which members live together in community and participate in daily Eucharist, pray the Divine Office, and engage in devotional practices together. They also wear a religious habit, work together in common apostolates, and are explicit about their fidelity to the Church and the teachings of the Magisterium.”

The growth of the Missionaries of Charity, founded by Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, lends support to this thesis. According to the United States Catholic Mission Association’s 2010 handbook, 65 of the US citizens who belong to the Missionaries of Charity now serve abroad—up from 17 in 2004.

THE LIVES OF MISSIONARIES

Maryknoll priests, says Father Hanlon, typically combine evangelization with their pastoral work.

“I call the work our men do ‘missionary-pastoral’ because most work in the same sorts of recognizable priestly or religious work you might find here in the US, but it would have more of a missionary goal to it than a pastoral one,” he says. “For example, I myself worked as a parish priest in Japan for 17 years, but never did I think that my work was just to my tiny flock. Rather, I thought that my work, and the work of the faithful in the pews, was to preach the Gospel by our words and our lives to the over 90 percent non-Christian population. We would try to involve others in our various Church minis-



Spanish Jesuit Father Fermin Rodriguez comforts a patient with Hansen’s disease at the Tai Kam leprosanatorium, located on a tiny island about 50 miles down shore from Macao in China’s Guangdong province.

The same is true for pastors and others working in local diocesan parishes.”

“Young people need to hear that a life in mission is also a very good option for them to consider,” adds Father Michael Montoya, executive director of the United States Catholic Mission Association. “Unfortunately we do not speak enough about mission in our parishes—or our baptismal call to mission. Mission is a foreign word to many Catholics on the pews.”

Father Bevans believes that “the lack of vocations is due to the loss of prestige of priesthood and religious life around the world, the end of colonialism, [and] a theology of the possibility of salvation for all rather than a notion that all are on the brink of hell and need baptism for salvation. We need to rethink the reasons for mission in dialogue with these developments.”

is Father Roy Bourgeois, who was automatically excommunicated in 2008 for assisting at a woman’s “ordination” and now faces the prospect of laicization and dismissal from his order. Maryknoll superior general Father Ed Dougherty told Catholic News Service in April that “we learned about situations of injustice that took place in various parts of the world. And when we came back here, we were very vocal about peace and justice and spoke openly about what we’d seen. That wasn’t always an easy fit with the diocesan structures and led, in some cases, to Church leadership saying we were no longer welcome, because we were too extreme.”

“After the Council, many of us missionary groups sought to make our vocation more relevant to the greater world, so we emphasized, during the

tries and activities, especially those which try to help the poor, or those which try to improve the environment, things non-Christians more easily identify with; thus, we make friends for the Church, and hopefully the Holy Spirit opens their hearts a little more to considering the Gospel."

"Some of us also work in Catholic schools at various levels, and since most of the students at our schools are non-Christians, this is a very direct form of missionary contact with the greater population through the students and their families," he adds. "Besides these types of work, some men devote themselves more completely to works of charity, which is, historically, one of the greatest types of witness to the Gospel.... Those that do receive baptism are some of the finest Christians in the world, and by their baptism are great witnesses to the local population."

At times, American missionaries can find themselves in situations of political turmoil. Father Mosher's first decade in Chile coincided with the last decade of the military regime of Augusto Pinochet, who overthrew Marxist Salvador Allende in 1973 and left power in 1990.

"My day-to-day duties included many extraordinary activities beyond the parish, apart from the normal sacramental and formative duties of a priest anywhere," he recalls. "The Catholic Church was the sole protector of the people, oppressed by the military regime, and I would accompany those who were trying to avoid the road of confrontation and violence and search for peaceful means to return Chile to its democratic traditions and to a state of law."

He adds:

I and many others in the Church reached out to the victims of exile, torture, arbitrary arrests, violence from the state, as well as to the many groups neglected by the regime—the homeless, the unemployed, the impoverished sick—and helped them to establish workshops of education and job training, soup kitchens, basic ecclesial communities, and medical clinics. I often had to rush off to funerals of protestors killed during demonstrations, at one stage, and helped set up medical aid stations in our parish chapels There were also the small, quiet moments of sharing hot tea on cold evenings with supposed atheists, who could only admire the work of the Church

and would engage us in frank conversations about our values and views, leading many to rediscover the Christian faith that they had lost as adults.

The ensuing decades of democracy brought new social problems to Chile. "Drug addiction and trafficking flourished, creating a culture of violence and disruption, especially [in] the poorer areas," Father Mosher recounts. "In parish life, we became concerned with the street violence, broken families, materialism, extreme competitiveness, individualism, apathy towards the democratic system, and the selling

ther Mazur. "The megalopolises of the world are where much mission work now needs to take place."

"Probably the most significant trend in mission *ad gentes* is the number of lay missionaries responding to this call," says Sister Madge Karecki, director of the Archdiocese of Chicago's Office for Mission Education and Animation.

"Some of the cutting-edge issues are the role of liturgy and prayer in the missionary enterprise and the commitment to ecological wholeness," Father Bevans states. "Social justice issues and issues around reconciliation are still paramount, as are issues about interreligious dialogue."

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off of vast natural resources to foreign companies, as well as the contamination of water, air, and land." Serving as the ecumenical officer for the Chilean bishops' conference, Father Mosher says that he "participated in efforts to bring the different Christian communities in the country, especially Pentecostal Christians (some 10 percent of the population) and Catholics (72 percent), together in a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation."

EMERGING TRENDS

In *Redemptoris Missio*, Blessed John Paul called upon missionary institutes to focus their attention on Asia, big cities, the young, and refugees. The Pope's words have had an influence on the life of missionary institutes.

"One important emerging trend is that we are more focused on Asia than we were for the latter part of the 20th century," says Father Hanlon. "This focus comes in no small part from the call of Blessed John Paul and Pope Benedict that we look to Asia, that we consider its billions who do not know Christ, who may never encounter a missionary in the flesh unless we go."

"Mission work *ad gentes* has moved from rural to urban settings," adds Fa-

Asked what advice they would give to young men and women considering a missionary vocation, missionaries who spoke with CWR most frequently recommend prayer and spiritual direction. Father Hanlon also recommends corporal works of mercy and daily Mass, while Msgr. Dale suggests reading *Redemptoris Missio*. Father Bevans, a former president of the American Society of Missiology, says that

when one goes to another culture it is important to take the time to listen, to learn the language, and to really bond with the people. Don't stay just in the "mission compound." Missionary life will demand a rich spiritual life as well, so get a good spiritual director. Don't be too eager to "proclaim" the message—wait until you know the people, and even until they ask you why you are there or what you have to share with them.

"Do not let the opportunity pass you by," adds Father Mosher. "The rewards of a life lived by trusting in that deeply-felt calling are vast, incalculable." ■

JEFF ZIEGLER writes from North Carolina.