Signs of hope

Lay missioners help Cambodia’s Deaf community build a better future
In Kampot, Cambodia, students in the Deaf Development Programme’s Basic Education Project respond to teachers’ questions.

Come walk with us
FOR NEARLY 45 YEARS, Maryknoll lay missioners have uniquely lived their baptismal call to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ by “crossing boundaries of culture, nationality and faith to join [their] lives with impoverished and oppressed peoples of the earth.” They join their lives and walk with our global sisters and brothers whose courage, resilience and work for justice inspires us in the belief that a world of peace is possible.

I believe this extraordinary joint mission is only possible with faith as both anchor and guide. Amidst the rapid changes around the world in which the challenges of global poverty and injustice grow increasingly more complex, our faith grounds us in hope, allowing us to imagine and work for a better world. Faith inspires our fullest commitment to mission, through which we invest our whole selves in building the reign of God and fostering change that has a profound and lasting impact on the lives of those entrusted to our care.

That includes the Deaf community in Cambodia, which is featured in this issue, as it does differently-abled children in Bolivia, women affected by HIV in Tanzania and young people seeking a chance for education in South Sudan, women and men in Brazilian prisons and those benefitting from the soy nutrition project in El Salvador — “just as you did for one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

These communities and others have enjoyed long-lasting and mutually enriching relationships with Maryknoll lay missioners. These relationships and the varied ministries that have built them are powerful expressions of God’s promise to always make the world anew.

We give thanks to all of you who also have faith that God’s promise is being fulfilled at this moment. We give thanks for the many ways you choose to journey with and support us. Together we are the different world God longs to bring forth. As the mystics say, “Look around. The world is full of God.”

What else could generate more hope? Peace and every good.

Inspire us to creative responses And justice that restores relationships And hope for all.

May those who knock at our door Seeking refuge and hope, Who are met with condemnation and walls by this nation, May they challenge us To live our baptismal promise to the Gospel, And may they judge us with compassion when we fail.

Amen.

Deepen my compassion, O God
BY HEIDI CERNEKA

Deepen my compassion, O God.
You are the judge, not me.

My sister left behind home, family, culture, language
When she fled to protect her life, her children, their future,
As greed and power ravaged her nation.

My brother asked for refuge,
A refuge promised by the UN and the U.S.,
But we welcomed him with detention,
Separation from loved ones,
Teach me to walk a mile in their sandals
And be moved to indignation and action.

Stretch my compassion, O God,
To embrace those
Who see this reality differently,
Move us beyond entrenched beliefs,
Cortney Freshwater celebrates women.

Día de la Comadres, also in Haiti, finds that, while wrestling with vocabulary and verb forms can be frustrating, even when she doesn’t quite get the words right, her efforts lead to a deeper kind of learning—“learning to trust in God and be patient with myself.”

“Paciente, paciente. Poco a poco.”

“Pole pole ndiyo mwendo” For example, Rich acknowledges that there are something like 600 different Swahili proverbs he has learned so far—“learning to trust in God to help you”—and it has been especially helpful when he is trying to form relationships with local people. “I am taught that local wisdom is helpful in reminding her to develop that patience. When she is frustrated, her language teacher counsels Paciente, paciente. Poco a poco. Patient, patient. Little by little.

Kevin McDonough took a similar local wisdom to heart when he and his wife, Marilyn, arrived in Tanzania. Two Swahili proverbs he has learned so far are “Pole pole ndiyo mwendo” (slowly, slowly is the way to go) and “Vairakuru harassed haina karuku” (hurry, hurry has no blessing). As he points out, “This of course is especially applicable to us as we struggle mightily to absorb a totally new language and culture.”

“Abby Belt in Haiti has a new transportation— the moto.”

In this understanding of mission, “missioners do not ‘bring Jesus’ to those places they go. Jesus is already present there.” Joe therefore sees his ministry as primarily “one of accompaniment—accompanying.” and his most important task is “to walk with Bolivians,” a task that requires him to try to see the world through their eyes and ears.

In addition to becoming familiar with local languages, the new missioners explore and analyze the social, political, and economic realities of their host countries.

One of the most common themes in the places where missioners are sent is widespread poverty. For example, when visiting a rural community near where she lives in El Salvador, Jaynie Prior discovered that some people make only $1.50 a day picking coffee.

Half a world away, in Kibera, the largest slum in Nairobi, Rich Tarro encountered a similar reality. Many people in Kibera “don’t have the means to earn a living, and ... lack access to basic human services.” Both Jaynie and Rich report that many of the people they encounter lack running water.

While the missioners are learning new roles, guided by local wisdom, they are often surprised by the joy and resiliency born from slavery and the fighting for freedom from it. She adds that “where one may initially expect to find an understandable bitterness, frustration, and chagrin, one instead finds hope, beauty, and generous wisdom.”

“This generous wisdom” of the people they meet will no doubt continue to inspire the new missioners as they work with local partners to help address the needs of these communities. For now, though, they are learning that the life of a missioner is one of ongoing study. As they conjugate verbs and adjust to a world very different from the one they come from, probably most would agree with the way Rich Tarro sums it up, saying simply, “I continue to have a lot to learn.”

How lay missioners have assisted Cambodia’s Deaf community in building a better future

“Remember hiding in a ditch, with some tree limbs over us,” says Heang Samath. “There were four of us together. My parents, my older brother who was hearing, and me—the one deaf person. My parents told us we needed to be quiet.” The year was 1975 in Cambodia, the year the Khmer Rouge came to power, and Samath was 5 years old. For the next four years, Pol Pot and his henchmen tore apart the lives of Cambodians. An estimated 2 million, about one in four Cambodians were killed during this time—many of them murdered and tortured and others dying from malnutrition, disease and forced labor.

Samath, the longest serving staff member of the Maryknoll Deaf Development Programme (DDP), will often recount his past experiences during the Khmer Rouge for visitors. He vividly remembers the bombs, the planes, the gunfire and walking for a long time and seeing bodies alongside the road. His family eventually ended up in Phnom Penh, where in 1979 they began to rebuild their lives.

Samath was not able to attend school. Schools were not equipped to educate a child who was deaf, and deafness was assumed to be related to a lack of capacity. Samath helped in the fields and around the house, using the home signs he had developed to communicate with his family. Then in 1997 the direction of his life changed. The Finnish Association of the Deaf (FAD) had sent field workers to Cam-

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bodia to gather deaf individuals to document Cambodian Sign Language (CSL). Samath was one of the first individuals they met, and since the age of 27, he has played a key role in the development of the Cambodian Deaf community.

At the time, deaf Cambodians didn’t have a formal sign language, and at this early stage, Samath and other deaf individuals shared the signs they had been using so they could be documented. Because of his artistic ability, Samath became the first CSL illustrator, meticulously drawing the signs for different concepts and words.

Since then, he has been serving as a teacher for other deaf individuals and is frequently called as a teacher for other deaf individuals and is frequently called a sign language interpreter or many other titles. At the very beginning, Maryknoll lay missioner Judy Saumweber supported the work of the Cambodia Disabled Peoples Organization (CDPO), which was FAD’s local partner in implementing the programs. Through her connection, Father Charlie Dittmeier became involved with the group. As CDPO faltered and was going to end the deaf-focused program, Father Charlie and Maryknoll became the official partners of FAD in 2001. The program began to adapt to better meet the needs of the deaf population and more closely align with international best practices.

Father Charlie, a deacon and member of Maryknoll Lay Missioners, still serves as the co-director of the program. Under his leadership, the staff is currently composed of a quarter Deaf Cambodians, who have taught the hearing Cambodian staff about the need to respect deaf culture, listen to the Deaf community and advocate alongside them for equality in society. As the DDP mission statement says, the goal is that “Deaf people are accepted, respected and included as equals in all aspects of Cambodian society.”

When asked about the missionaries who have served at DDP, Kent Solly, co-director of DDP, can name each one. “DDP has really improved because of all of them,” he says. Celina Campas was one of the first lay missionaries to join Father Charlie and served in the Basic Education Project. Celina covered classes and helped in the creation of new materials, sharing advice on teaching techniques, which Thuch Sophy, Basic Education Project manager, said she still passes on to her teachers.

While she was studying Khmer, Celina lived with Ly Bolika, who is currently the project manager for the Deaf Community Center. Lyla laughs about how they would watch different soap operas in the evening to practice their English and Khmer. Celina would explain the ones in English to Lyla and vice versa. Beyond the concrete contributions.

So, like Samath before him, Solly’s life and story became linked to DDP when Susan hired him as a staff member to support the Social Services Project. He later joined the Basic Education Project and today is a sign language teacher.

Tay Vannarith, the first social worker hired for the program, explains how Susan brought her many years of experience as a social worker, helped him learn how to document cases and do consultations. Vannarith brought his cultural knowledge as a native Cambodian and his knowledge from his recently earned master’s degree in social work. Together, he explains, they learned how to work with the deaf population, as this was new to both of them.

“Deaf people have problems, too,” Vannarith says. “This was the first time they could really talk to someone about it because as far as there were no social workers that understood sign language.”

Equally important within DDP are the Maryknoll lay missionaries who have helped in structural positions. Nancy Davies, class of 2012, instituted the Basic Education Project at DDP—a project that missionary Celina Campas helped to develop.
processes and systems, and the meeting of basic needs—with each new missioner building on the foundation left by those who came before, strengthened by the local staff who kept the efforts going.As Keat Sokly puts it, “One of the most important things Maryknoll brings to Cambodi- dia is sustainability. Maryknoll lay missioners come to Cam- bodia and work with the local staff. That means first that they contribute directly to the proj- ect activities, and second that they build the capacity of our local staff. It means that, after they leave, our local staff can continue the work by them- selves.”

As a result, many deaf individu- als are now able to find work in hearing businesses, and some are entrepreneurs running their own small busi- nesses. Equally important, our hearing care staff members have become better allies with the Deaf community, working as allies to help the majority cul- ture pay attention, listen, and understand.

What this all means for Samath, Sopor, Kimhorn and many other members of the Deaf community, is that DDP has played an important role in opening space for them to flourish, to embrace their full potential, and to advocate for themselves and future gener- ations of the Cambodian Deaf community.

Karen Bortvedt (class of 2013) is the current coordinator of Maryknoll Lay Mi- sioners. She served as a missioner with the Maryknoll Deaf Develop- ment Programme in Cambodia from 2014 to 2017.

To view videos about the Deaf Development Programme in Phnom Penh and Maryknoll lay missioners’ contributions to it, please visit bit.ly/3xkmDDP
A new mission is growing in Haiti

With the recent arrival of Sami Scott, Maryknoll Lay Missioners has begun a new commitment in Haiti. Sami is bringing her experience with finance and administration to the Jean Marie Vincent Agricultural Center in Gros Morne. Here she is watering cedar tree saplings for a reforestation program. The agricultural center teaches sustainable farming practices and runs a tree nursery, farm, fish tanks and a guesthouse. There are plans to add a bakery, preschool and block factory.

Sami is joined by new lay missioner Abby Belt (photo on page 4), who will be using her experience in education and sports in a ministry for youth.

Research assists survivors of human trafficking

Together with colleagues from the Chab Dai Coalition, lay missioner James Havey (left) recently presented at the Asia Region Anti-Trafficking Conference in Bangkok. James is an advisor for the coalition’s Butterfly 10-Year Reintegration Research Project. The conference was one of many recent forums at which James has shared the top 10 findings (bit.ly/Top10ButterflyResearch) of the research. At the end of March, James and his colleagues presented their research at events in Alabama, New York City and Boston.
A play for peace

In a violence-plagued community of El Salvador, Larry Parr is providing guidance and alternatives to youth.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MEINRAD SCHERER-EMUNDS

halfway up the back slope of San Salvador Volcano, César Hernández wakes up at 4 a.m. and leaves his family’s home on a coffee plantation at 5. He makes the hour-long walk down the mountain to the community of Las Delicias, where he catches the bus for another hour’s ride to San Salvador.

On the way through his town, he must be careful whom he talks to. Not only are gang members watching everything and everyone, the police or military frequently come up the dirt roads “looking for them.” To them every young man from the community of Las Delicias, where César lives, is a suspected gang member. They are “looking for young people from ages 6 to 21 to play soccer and participate in tournaments. Even by young leaders from the community who serve as role models and mentors, it is more than a soccer program. “Our motto is ‘First, God. Second, studies. Third, sports,’” Larry explains. “God is always first. We always pray and give thanks to God, and we always read the Bible before each practice. Then we focus on the importance of studying, and finally sports.”

The scholarship recipients help lead many of the program’s activities. “I love teaching kids sports and arts,” César says. “We not only help them develop athletically but we are also helping them develop their talents and teach them how to deal with their problems, family crises or difficulties they may have at school. These programs help to relieve their stress. Being able to help others gives me great satisfaction and joy. Together we will make this a better community.”

His favorite is the breakdance program, through which he passes on his own passion for breakdance to younger kids who just as eagerly embrace it. Larry says, “It is very difficult for kids in marginalized communities to have opportunities.”

Larry Parr works with college scholarship students César Hernández, Yadira Quilzapa and William Méndez in Las Delicias, El Salvador. San Salvador Volcano is in the background.

Michael Brian, the school’s custodian, has prepared a letter for Maryknoll Lay Missioners. “This program is a great blessing,” she writes, “not only for my children but for many young people in this community. From the bottom of my heart, I give thanks to God and to all who, with their great hearts, have given us the opportunity to have projects like this one to help improve our school and our community.”

Larry Parr

Are you feeling called to serve overseas as a Maryknoll lay missioner?

Whether single, married or a family, whether recently graduated, recently retired or somewhere in between, we would love to help you reflect on what may be next for you.

Visit mklm.org/discern for more information on upcoming discernment retreats, webinars, and resources.

REQUESTS FOR APPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASS OF 2019 ARE DUE BY MAY 1.
Join us in a MISSION IMMERSION TRIP led by our missioners.
Learn about our ministries and the communities where we live and work.
Come and see how together we are creating a more just and compassionate world.

Sign up for an immersion trip to ...

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*Deadline for signups: June 7, 2019*

**CAMBODIA**
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*Deadline for signups: June 10, 2019*

**TANZANIA**
WITH JUSTFAITH MINISTRIES, August 13-25, 2019
*Deadline for signups: June 13, 2019*

**KENYA** October 17-28, 2019
*Deadline for signups: July 17, 2019*

**EL SALVADOR**
WITH JUSTFAITH MINISTRIES, Nov. 29-Dec. 8, 2019
*Deadline for signups: August 29, 2019*

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