Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Ministry



Carmelite Sisters of Vedruna Sr. Judy Padasas, left, meets with families who live under an overpass in Delhi called Moti Bagh. In an attempt by the government to beautify the city, these people face being removed from their spot. (Alina Tiphagne)



by Sr. Jean Quinn

Contributor

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Editor's note: *More than 1.6 billion people worldwide live in substandard housing. Of those, at least 150 million have no home at all. In this special series, A Place to Call Home, Global Sisters Report is focusing on women religious helping people who are homeless or lack adequate shelter. The series examines how homelessness and a lack of affordable housing affect teens and young adults, families, migrants, the elderly and those displaced by natural disasters and climate change in stories from Kenya, India, Vietnam, Ireland, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, the United States and elsewhere.*



(GSR graphic/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

UNANIMA International is a coalition of 22 different congregations of sisters and friends who advocate at the United Nations. A vital part of our mission is to ensure that the voice and the journey of those who have experienced homelessness continues to be heard. To date, our research on family homelessness, displacement and trauma has enabled us to bring the lived experiences of people — especially women and children who have no home — to be heard directly by decision makers, to give them a place at the table.

Here we are months later, collectively experiencing and witnessing a time of great upheaval, where those most vulnerable — as always — will suffer the most. United by our shared belief in social justice, we will emerge from this time even more unified and devoted to the task of eliminating homelessness. One thing that remains striking to me in this time of hardship is that people all over the world are rising to the occasion and giving their best efforts especially to the homeless and marginalized.

The member communities of UNANIMA International have been sharing with us their work on the ground during the pandemic. Each in their own way, many of our sisters and their ministries are contributing greatly to helping vulnerable individuals and families, including people experiencing homelessness.

In Litchfield, Connecticut, Wisdom House Retreat and Conference Centre closed due to COVID-19. It is known for its delicious and healthy meals, and the sisters have since heard the call for help; they have been preparing nightly meals for a local homeless shelter. Other sisters throughout the USA are transferring their government "pandemic pension" checks to the local food bank programs and to the assistance of local families who need rent money. During Holy Week, sisters in India started an outreach food/education program combined with prayers. This project is primarily incorporated into their mobile outreach.

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One of our Carmelite Sisters of Vedruna communities in Tagaytay in the Philippines, like many, is quarantined due to the virus. This particular community has a program for the tribal children. They are trying to stay focused on some of the *good* things, for the sake of the children. Sister Liza writes:

> There are also positive things happening because of community quarantine … nature is happy. After the eruption, nature now is resting, peaceful and back to its normal beauty. The volcano also is peaceful. We can always see the moon and the stars at night. The sad thing is that there are lots of people suffering because of the pandemic caused by COVID-19. Many are hungry, especially the poor, and many have lost their lives. Before, also, there were lots of natural calamities happening in our country

that also caused death because of not taking care of our nature. People abuse it by creating things that destroy nature. Now, no more air pollution!

We have also seen many of our communities focus their ministries on providing for both documented and displaced migrants. Caritas has been working for refugees and migrants since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, distributing food and hygiene kits through its PARI (Point d'Accueil pour les Réfugiés et Immigrés, a reception desk for refugees and immigrants) sector. There Marist Sr. Josephine Gueye has been in charge of carrying out various actions to relieve refugees. As a social worker ministering in PARI, Sister Josephine is responsible for identifying the most vulnerable families (while being aware that not all families' needs can be satisfied). Every day, she receives phone calls for help from refugee families who lack the basic necessities. Faced with this situation, she listens, discerns and acts to solve the problem.



UNANIMA International's board of directors includes one sister representative from each of the 22 congregations represented. (Provided photo)

In the colonial space of Ceuta, Spain, sisters are attending to the migrant populations that continue crossing into the Iberian Peninsula. They are also educating and caring for the wider population hit so hard with the virus. This video clip of the arrival of a group of migrants who had crossed the barbed wire barriers is a Spanish narrative, but the images speak for themselves.

Daughter of Wisdom Sr. Sara Proctor, a certified physician assistant, runs free medical clinics in the Diocese of St. Petersburg, Florida, for the uninsured. Typically,

patients are migrants and seasonal workers, but now they have come to include people from Catholic Charities' new homeless tent project. Sister Sara and her staff have improvised to see patients outside. Thanks to great innovative minds, medical care continues during this time of crisis for the medically underserved of the St. Petersburg Diocese.

Around the world, members of UNANIMA International have taken to delivering pastoral care, materials and support via online platforms. While this is a new approach for many, they continue to tend to the needs of their community in a meaningful manner. Like many others, a community of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart in the United Kingdom are keeping in touch with their parishioners on behalf of their parish priest and livestreaming different prayers on a daily basis and outreach letters via email. Their retreat houses in Philadelphia are also adopting livestreaming as a means of communication.



In India the Carmelite Sisters of Vedruna started an outreach food and education program. This project is primarily incorporated into their mobile outreach...and combined with Holy Week prayers. (Maureen Foltz)

In three languages, the Carmelite Sisters of Vedruna's international communications team has invited us and all our various realities, with a *virtual* communication and reflection, to create a connection with them.

As a collective, UNANIMA International has initiated a call to action around the recognition and support of people experiencing family homelessness and housing

insecurity at the international level. We have released a statement on COVID-19 and family homelessness in seven languages (English here) as well as organized social media events, such as Twitter storms, to gain traction on the issue and promote education and advocacy in grassroots spaces and international and domestic political spaces.

As its director, on behalf of UNANIMA International, I would like to give recognition to the wonderful sisters and all people who continue to work at the frontlines in battling this virus. We would also like to give a special commendation to all of our sisters who have been taken by the virus, thanking them for their lifetime of service. We send our prayers to all those who continue to suffer from the direct and indirect effects of it.

[Jean Quinn is a member of the Congregation of the Daughters of Wisdom. She is currently the executive director of UNANIMA International, a coalition of 22 groups of women religious working at the United Nations. She continues her work with the homeless as the co-chair of the NGO Working Group to End Homelessness.]

This story appears in the **A Place to Call Home** and **Sustainable Development Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals** feature series.