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Sr. Marilyn Minter, director of the Mother Angela Mobile Clinic near Jacmel, Haiti (Courtesy of Sr. Marilyn Minter)

by GSR Staff

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Much has changed around the world in the last six months, but women religious are still ministering to those who need help in the face of a deadly pandemic that has killed over 920,000 people. This week, Global Sisters Report writers will provide updates on sisters they previously interviewed and how the coronavirus has changed the work they do. Part 2 will be published Thursday, Sept. 17.

Haiti: 'Going to battle' with a mobile clinic

Related: 'Accompaniment' spiritually underpins sisters' missions in Haiti

In Haiti, a Felician ministry in Jacmel on Haiti's southern coast has faced a number of challenges in the last six months, Felician Sr. Marilyn Marie Minter told GSR in an email, though, she added, "we see it as a grace and a response to the needs of the times."

When the country went into quarantine in March, she wrote, the congregation's "afterschool and food programs, faith formation programs, and computer lab activities came to a halt."



Dr. Valcin Wikerson works with a patient as part of the Mother Angela Mobile Clinic near Jacmel, Haiti. (Courtesy of Sr. Marilyn Minter)

One program continued with strict social distancing precautions: a mobile clinic program named after the congregation's foundress, Mother Mary Angela. The sisters decided not to stop the program because all other medical services in the area, particularly those serving economically poor rural communities, were halted.

" 'Going to battle' were the words our doctors of the Mother Angela Mobile Clinic spoke as hospitals closed and there were no health care services for the poor," Minter wrote.

But that was not easy. With the border with the neighboring Dominican Republic closed, access to medicine proved difficult, as was access to needed personal protective equipment.

Fortunately, the medicine eventually came through with the help of doctors the sisters knew. As for the protective equipment, some assistance from Felician Sisters in Lodi, New Jersey, helped, but "there were still no gowns to spare," Minter wrote.

Thanks to the talents of "gifted seamstress" Sr. Mary Izajasza Rojek, "within 24 hours, each team member had two gowns."

The mobile clinic is able to do its work and follows "all regulations given from the Ministry of Health, which allowed no more than five people to gather in one place at a time."

"The days were difficult," Minter wrote, "but the challenges did not stop the clinic from going to place to place throughout the Diocese of Jacmel, serving the sick and those who did not have access to healthcare at the height of the pandemic."

The Felician Sisters of North America continue to send supplies that have allowed the Jacmel ministry "to serve where needed as our foundress Mother Mary Angela taught us to do."

"The pandemic is still very much present, but schools and churches and businesses are slowly reopening, and our people live in their difficult situation as best they can, taking one day at a time with the grace of God," Minter said.



Sr. Matthias Choi of the Kkottongnae Sisters of Jesus in 2016 (GSR file photo)

Meanwhile, just outside the capital of Port-au-Prince, in the communal area of Croix-des-Bouquets, Korean Sr. Matthias Choi, who heads the Haiti mission of the Kkottongnae Sisters of Jesus, a South Korean congregation, said in an email the overall situation caused by the pandemic in Haiti remains serious, though the number of infections has shown a decline recently.

Kkottongnae has resumed its outreach in areas requiring assistance and welcomes those in need at its facility outside of Port-au-Prince after a period of quarantine. The group is still not allowing volunteers and visitors into its compound, Choi said.

"We are still taking precautions," Choi said. "We are continually praying for an end to COVID-19."

Related: Q & A with Sr. Matthias Choi, caring for Haiti's neglected elderly

Western India: The four walls that counter a threat to well-being



Sr. Lucy Kurien, center, and the staff of Maher in Pune, Maharashtra, India, prepare food packets for distribution in nearby villages during the lockdown. (Provided photo)

Related: Q & A with Lucy Kurien, providing shelter and love in India

The COVID-19 lockdown has been a challenging time for Sr. Lucy Kurien, founder of Maher (Mother's Home), a shelter for distressed women in the western Indian city of Pune.

"We have to take care of four walls in this period — physical strength, emotional strength, mental strength and spiritual strength — to counter any external threat to our well-being," the member of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod told GSR.

She said approximately 40 women, some with children, arrived at Maher seeking asylum as the lockdown began in India on March 25.

"We had foreseen the situation and had prepared rooms," she said. The women were troubled by their husbands, who were without jobs.

"Some of those women have found jobs [working for] families and are safe now. Some have returned home, a few are still at Maher," she added.



Sr. Lucy Kurien, in yellow, and a Maher staff member, in orange, with migrants who came to Maher in Pune, Maharashtra, India, seeking help. They are on their way walking to their hometowns. (Provided photo)

Kurien said she and her team provided food for more than 25,000 migrant laborers who were stranded by the lockdown. "Many of them had lost their jobs and were going to their native places."



Sr. Lucy Kurien of the Congregation of Holy Cross of Chavanod (Provided photo)

Her staff studied the situation in the slums in an 85-kilometer (52-mile) radius around the shelter and then provided cooked meals for around 600 people daily.

"Our relief-work teams provided masks, sanitizers and medical help to around 6,000 vulnerable families. Besides, we also reached out to 4,000 people in 21 villages," Kurien added.

Maher is known for its charitable services, and police officers have brought six young women who were raped and got pregnant to the shelter so far during the pandemic.

"We attended to their delivery cases in the hospital and now care for the mothers and the babies," Kurien said. "Policemen brought to us 20 children, too. Five of them lost their parents and were employed for rag-picking by others. Informed by the neighbors, police saved and brought them to Maher."

Maher also held two mental health workshops during the lockdown, as it was concerned about mental health issues among women and children.

Chile: Reinvention and reorganization are key

Related: Sister-run center trains people in trades, entrepreneurship to improve lives

The protests that had engulfed Santiago, Chile, since October were still unresolved when the coronavirus came to the capital's door, exacerbating some of the issues being protested: cost of living, public transportation and income inequality, among others.

In March, the Puente Alto suburbs, where Sr. Gabriela Herrera's social service center is located, was filled with people unable to get to work because of the public transportation strikes. Now, many of those people don't have jobs at all.

The sister-run Dolores Sopeña Center, which Herrera directs, has always catered to the needs of people who are poor in their area, including those without education, migrant families and unemployed professionals they call "the educated poor." Through its courses and programs, the entrepreneurial center, one of almost 40 throughout Spain and Latin America, has graduated tens of thousands of men and women.



Bringing donations with them, a team from the Dolores Sopeña Center heads to the local field where families who couldn't afford to stay in their homes have resorted to building improvised houses. (Photo provided by Sr. Gabriela Herrera, of the Dolores Sopeña Catechist Institute)

Today, its forced shift to online classes has been one of several ways in which those living in poverty — particularly those without internet or computer access — get left behind, said Herrera, a sister of the Dolores Sopeña Catechist Institute. And just as the virus began to spread at the heels of social unrest, it came at the very start of the school year in March.

The center, meanwhile, has had to figure out how to "reinvent and reorganize" itself so it can continue to meet the new needs of the day, she said. So, in addition to taking some courses online (though that has been challenging for the classes on manual skills that require material, such as baking and carpentry), the center has reinforced its networking with other associations and local parishes.

Together, they provide canned and dried foods to recently laid-off parents of middle-class families and to impoverished, often migrant families who couldn't afford to stay in their homes and are currently living in makeshift "precarious" shacks on a shared lot, she said. Through that social campaign, the center has also been putting

its energy toward collecting donations of mattresses, blankets and winter clothes.

"It's been incredibly difficult because we never anticipated it'd be so prolonged," Herrera said. "Every day, we've just been figuring out how to adapt."

Kenya: A struggle to make ends meet

Related: Q & A with Sr. Redemptor Ikonga on her passion for taking care of Mother Nature

In Nyahururu, a small town in central Kenya, sisters from the Dimesse congregation run Talitha Kum Children's Home, which provides community care to orphaned HIV-positive children who cannot find a safe place in the larger community.

The home grew from the HIV/AIDS alcohol and drug abuse program of St. Martin Catholic Social Apostolate community programs. In a population of 50 million in the East African country, 1.6 million people of all ages were living with HIV in 2018, according to UNAIDS, the body leading the global effort to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030 as part of the sustainable development goals.

Currently, the home has 88 children whose ages range from 4 to 16. The children are provided with a home and schooling.

"Talitha Kum" is derived from Mark 5:41, where Jesus speaks to an apparently lifeless girl. After speaking the Aramaic words "Talitha kum" ("Young girl, I say to you, arise"), Jesus takes her by the hand, and they walk together.



Sr. Redemptor Ikonga plays with a boy who is an orphan at Talitha Kum Children's Home in western Kenya in 2019. (GSR photo / Doreen Ajiambo)

However, the spread of COVID-19 has impacted negatively the lives of these children. Sisters have been appealing for financial assistance to feed the children.

Religious sisters at the home also said the pandemic has caused delays in payment of staff salaries and utility bills such as water and electricity because the home heavily relies on donations to stay afloat.

"Financial constraints became a great challenge since people stopped visiting the home, and also, many people lost their jobs, which became hard even for them to make their contributions," said Sr. Redemptor Ikonga, who is the administrator of the home.

"With the COVID-19 pandemic, there also rose lack of some of the [antiretroviral drug] supply in the government hospitals, which made the medical budget go higher, yet they were being given free before the COVID pandemic."

Still, they are adjusting to doing their work amid the pandemic.

"With regards to fundraising, we have adapted new means of mobilization and awareness through the supermarkets whereby placards and donation tins are placed to raise money to feed children," Ikonga said. "We are working with the government to ensure children don't miss their medication. For cases of lab tests, special arrangement has been made whereby all children are booked in for one day and safety measures for children are observed."

United States: Peanut butter sandwiches and namaste at the US-Mexico border

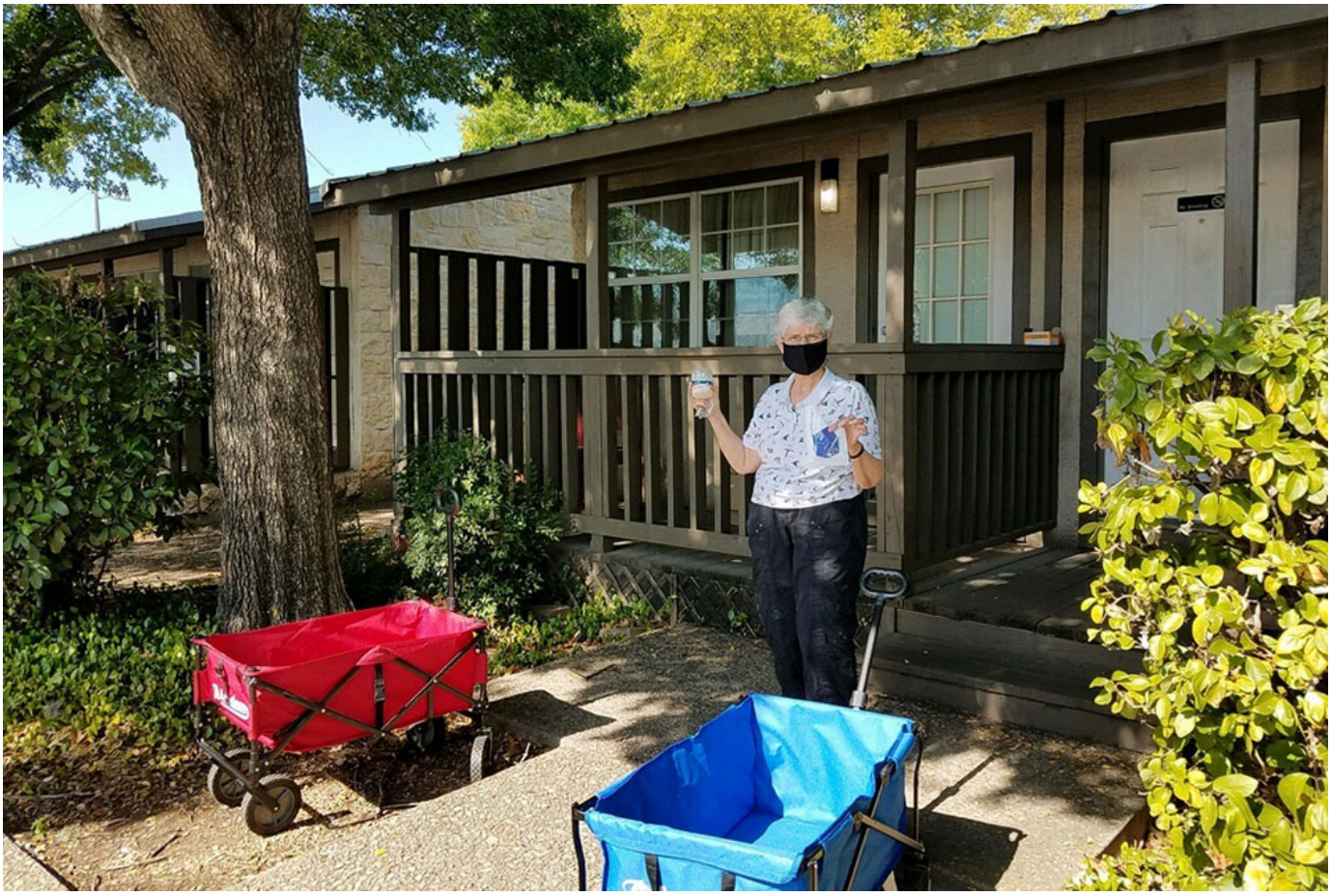
Related: Welcome of the heart: Sisters build bonds in collaborative effort to assist immigrants

As part of the Interfaith Welcome Coalition's army of volunteers, Sr. Sharon Altendorf regularly passed out backpacks, dispensed meals and played with the children of immigrants released from detention centers at the San Antonio, Texas, Greyhound bus station.

But that was in June 2019, before COVID-19 and the Trump administration's "Remain in Mexico" policy, officially called the Migrant Protection Protocols, stemmed the flow of asylum-seekers.

Lenna Baxter, co-chair of the Interfaith Welcome Coalition, said when bus station and airport arrivals dropped from 23,698 in the first seven months of 2019 to 1,426 over the same period in 2020, volunteer numbers at these locations fell from about 10 to one on call.

At first, Altendorf, a Sister of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, tried visiting immigrants stuck in Matamoros, Mexico, but COVID-19 halted her return, so she found other ways to connect.



Sr. Sharon Altendorf of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in front of one of the homes where immigrants quarantine after being released from detention in San Antonio, Texas. (Courtesy of Sr. Sharon Altendorf)

"We can't ... touch anybody at this point in time, and it's so different from our experience in the past of treating people and being with them," she said.

Focused on what she can do, Altendorf said she spends her days in Zoom meetings, praying, advocating and making peanut butter sandwiches for people experiencing homelessness.

"We've never stopped," she said. "It keeps changing as IWC has always changed as the need does."

The interfaith coalition now sends backpack funds to organizations serving on the border. Baxter said the coalition partnered with the city of San Antonio to start a new mission when U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement told them there were families who could not be released from detention without a place to quarantine.

"The city of San Antonio stepped up, found a facility to provide quarantine, and ICE began releasing the families," Baxter said.



Sr. Sharon Altendorf of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in front of one of the homes where immigrants quarantine after being released from detention in San Antonio, Texas. (Courtesy of Sr. Sharon Altendorf)

At times, Altendorf drops off diapers or laundry quarters for these families, making sure the delivery is contactless. Car caravan protests — horns blasting — gave her a safe way to advocate at a detention center in Karnes City, Texas, and ICE offices in San Antonio. She thought about becoming a poll worker, but the looming threat of COVID gave her pause.

"It's not just putting myself on the line, but it's our sisters, as well," she said.

Invited in August to pray before thousands at a Pray SA drive-in event organized by Christian author and pastor Max Lucado, Altendorf fended off hugs and handshakes in her own special way.

"They reached out their hand, and instead I did the namaste thing," she said, describing the yoga pose of hands joined as if in prayer.

Their reaction? "They just kind of smiled and pulled their hands back."

Southern India: A source of food, shelter, hygiene and health care



Sr. Boyapati Jayasree, a member of the Daughters of Wisdom and program coordinator for Dream India Network (Provided photo)

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, activist nun Sr. Boyapati Jayasree, 51, continues her mission relentlessly for people who are poor in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru.

As the program coordinator of the nonprofit Dream India Network, she reaches out to those who are poor and needy with food and medicine with the assistance of her colleagues, including 12 sisters from eight congregations in Bengaluru.

"With the support of like-minded individuals, organizations and restaurants, we have been distributing food packets to some 2,000 poor people every day," Jayasree, a member of the Daughters of Wisdom, told GSR in an interview.

Fifty-four Dream India Network foster homes, which take care of 432 vulnerable children with the support of various congregations in Bengaluru, were given kits containing rice, wheat flour, cereal, oil, soap, sanitizers, face masks and napkins.

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Under her leadership, the Dream India Network and its partners opened shelter homes for 4,000 migrant workers, and they are provided free accommodation, food and appropriate health and hygiene facilities.

Sixteen doctors and 45 counselors provide online consultation and counseling for people who test positive for COVID-19, as well as their families.

Jayasree trained Dream India Network volunteers to intervene in cases where people required medicines for COVID-19. The volunteers reached out to them with the required medical supplies, procured either from hospitals or medical shops.

Wherever the patient had to be taken to the hospital, the volunteers were there to extend full support. Free ambulance services are provided for COVID-19 patients and for burials to those who died of the virus.

"To carry on and sustain our activities, we have adopted some changes in our normal operations," Jayasree said. "To keep social distancing, we encourage DIN

colleagues to work from home most of the time and organize online meetings and webinars."

Dream India Network was founded in 2012 in Bengaluru by a group of people led by Salesian Fr. Edward Thomas. Jayasree joined the network three years after its founding.

"We continue our activities because as days pass, the challenges of living are becoming more and more difficult and complicated. Requests for help from the people are also increasing," Jayasree said.

Botswana: 'With COVID-19, anything can come up'



Sr. Tshepo Sengwatse of the Sisters of Calvary congregation attends to calls in her office at the Tlokweng Community Hall in the capital of Botswana, Gaborone, where she works as a social worker. (Rumbi Chakamba)

Related: A look at hunger in Africa during COVID-19: Sisters stepping in

Although it is a quiet morning in the village of Tlokweng, Botswana, for Sr. Tshepo Sengwatse from the Sisters of Calvary, it is another busy day at work. Her phone rings continuously as she liaises with clients, the police and colleagues on the various cases she is working on.

As a social worker for the Tlokweng Sub District Council in the Southeast District of Botswana, Sengwatse is tasked with providing counseling, assessing those who are destitute and needy, and working with the courts to assist juvenile offenders and victims of human trafficking.

However, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, her duties have increased drastically: She now has to balance her previous duties with the numerous challenges the pandemic has brought about.



Sr. Tshepo Sengwatse of the Sisters of Calvary congregation in Botswana receives a client who has come in for a counseling session outside her office at the Tlokweng Community Hall where she works as a social worker. (Rumbi Chakamba)

"Previously, I was able to schedule my work. Now, I can't even plan because with COVID-19, anything can come up," she said.

''We have more domestic violence cases, poverty is creeping in and children are being sexually abused. So we are just prioritizing our cases as they come in and putting children first."

Sengwatse said the increase in her workload points to problems that already existed within the community but were exacerbated by the pandemic.

"I think when we went into lockdown, people's true colors began to come out, as they did not have time to go out."

"This shows that there is something that is not right within our communities. It may be issues with promiscuity, as we found that when people were unable to go out, they began forcing themselves on their girlfriends, their wives and, in some cases, their children," she said.

She further added that this period has shown her that there is a need for more education and counseling within families.

"We need to start educating people on how to live together as families because inasmuch as people are living within the same house, they spend the majority of their time away from home because of work," she said. "So when they were now forced to spend the majority of their time with their family during the lockdown, they began having problems."

[Doreen Ajiambo, Rumbi Chakamba, Chris Herlinger, Sr. Lissy Maruthanakuzhy, Philip Mathew, Soli Salgado and Nuri Vallbona contributed to this report.]

This story appears in the **Pandemic vignettes** feature series. View the full series.