News



Srs. Imelda Ngwitu and Ancilla Abonyo interact with members of Holy Family Catholic Church's American Heritage Girls troop, a Christian-based organization with a focus on leadership for girls. Through the group, Ngwitu and Abonyo, both from Nairobi, Kenya, got to know the small community of Blakely, Georgia, where they served as members of the Ohio-based Glenmary Home Missioners. Abonyo has since left the area, but Ngwitu still serves there. (Courtesy of Dorann Cobb)



by Elizabeth Green

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Situated in flat, rowcropped South Georgia nearly three hours south of Atlanta, the state's bustling capital city, sits Blakely, population 5,000 people.

Blakely is often called the peanut capital of the world, harkening to its production of the agricultural crop Georgia produces far more than of its iconic peaches. This is truly the deep South; it's not a place where one would traditionally find a Catholic sister in her habit.

In her flowing garments, Sr. Imelda Ngwitu cuts an unusual figure as she makes her way around town. Her days are filled with interaction and education serving out of the Holy Family Catholic Church. A worker with the Glenmary Home Missioners, based in Fairfield, Ohio, Ngwitu is following the congregation's charism of growing the Catholic Church in rural areas.

It's challenging enough to learn English as a second language, and the Southern accent often complicates things further for Ngwitu, who is originally from Nairobi, Kenya. It was even harder for Ngwitu to come to Georgia from the country she loved. She'd never dreamed of leaving the city where she fulfilled a childhood dream serving in the Franciscan Sisters of St. Anna.

"I loved my country so much, and I had a lot of connections," she told Global Sisters Report. "But I was called one day by my superior … She told me, 'Now, the reason I called you — I want to send you for a mission.' "

Mystified, Ngwitu reminded her superior that she was already actively serving missions in Kenya.

"I asked her, 'Which mission? Where?' " Ngwitu recalled. "She said, 'USA.' "

Ngwitu could hardly breathe. She was going across the world, 7,500 miles from home.



Sr. Imelda Ngwitu (left) and Sr. Ancilla Abonyo pose with a character representing the Blakely, Georgia, area's claim to fame: the peanut. (Courtesy of Dorann Cobb)

It took nearly two years to obtain a temporary religious worker visa. When Ngwitu arrived in Blakely in December 2023, she found an economically depressed area — lots of blighted buildings and ailing infrastructure and a single hospital serving a multiple-county area. Glenmary serves primarily depressed Appalachia, and although Blakely is south of where the foothills start, its situation puts it squarely within Glenmary's purview.

Deacon Scott Watford is employed by Glenmary and, in the absence of a canonical pastor at Holy Family, serves as pastoral coordinator and Ngwitu's supervisor. Both Watford and Ngwitu are employees of Glenmary, although Ngwitu's religious community membership still lies with the Franciscan Sisters of St. Anna. The goal, Watford explained, is for Glenmary missionaries to organize groups of Catholics living in an area of designated mission work and build up a church to be self-

sufficient so that a priest can eventually be assigned from its diocese. In this case, the missionary group, which included two brothers when Ngwitu came, also operates out of St. Luke Catholic Church in nearby Cuthbert to serve eight counties.

"It's ideally an eight-year process. But the reality is, it typically is a lot more than eight years," Watford said. "It just depends on how things go and the results of the attempt. … They seek to serve in different ways for the common good in whatever areas they are in, which are typically areas of high need with a high poverty level."

Acclimating to a new community

In the early months of 2024, Ngwitu began setting up ministry and acclimating to a rural community alongside another Catholic sister, Ancilla Abonyo, also from the Franciscan Sisters of St. Anna in Nairobi. The two faced constant reminders that they were a world away from home, and the community noticed, too.

"In the eight counties where we serve, the Catholics are very much a small minority. People don't know what Catholic is, and they certainly have not met a religious sister," Watford said. "They also typically have not met somebody who is from a different country. All of those things create a lot of curiosity."



Srs. Imelda Ngwitu (left) and Ancilla Abonyo arrived to serve at Holy Family Catholic Church in Blakely, Georgia, in December 2023. The sisters are from Nairobi, Kenya. (Courtesy of Dorann Cobb)

People wanted to know about where the sisters were from and about the habits they wore. The result, Watford said, was increased connection. People began visiting the sisters' house on the Holy Family campus to try the East African food they prepared. With a little searching, they were able to find the fresh fare they needed in local grocery stores.

"Their food is very different from ours — much more healthy, I would say," Watford said. "They had to adapt, but they're able to purchase items that they're used to by and large."

But there have been moments of unavoidable incongruity. He remembers the sisters visiting a local diner with a Glenmary brother.

"He ordered this big breakfast, and the sisters didn't know what to order, so they said, 'We'll have what he's having.' " Watford said. "Out comes this plate with a huge stack of pancakes and sausage and eggs and everything you can imagine, and of course they couldn't possibly eat it — didn't even know what they were eating."

Watford also watched the sisters learn to navigate the Southwest Georgia dialect.

"Their English is much more British English than American," he said. "The windshield of the car is the windscreen. The hood is the body, the trunk is the boot, and any number of things like that. … Even the vocabulary is different, so that's certainly been a struggle, and it still is."

All of this has meant growth for Watford.

"This is a learning experience for me, too. I've supervised staff and that sort of thing in larger churches but never worked with anyone from another country, certainly not from East Africa," he said.

Holy Family parishioner Dorann Cobb has worked alongside Ngwitu from early on. Within a week of arriving, Ngwitu and Abonyo had joined Holy Family's American Heritage Girls troop, a Christian-based leadership organization for girls, as adult members. That gave them a proper introduction to the community, accompanying Cobb and her two young daughters on outreach efforts around town.



From left: Deacon Scott Watford; Sr. Imelda Ngwitu; Savannah, Georgia, Bishop Stephen Parkes; Sr. Ancilla Abonyo; and Fr. Mike Kerin (Courtesy of Glenmary Missioners)

From these interactions, Cobb and the sisters got the idea to produce business cards identifying the sisters, how to reach them and explaining what Catholic sisters do. Like Watford, Cobb watched the community begin to accept and elevate the sisters.

"The most beautiful thing that has come out of the ministry has been to see Southern Baptist children run up to sisters … and call them 'sister' out of respect," she said.

The sisters learned that in spaces like public schools and libraries where religion might not be a subject they could lead with, they could break the ice with a presentation about Kenya. People often asked questions about Catholicism and the sisters' service from there, Cobb said.

In the nursing homes, where prayer is a more common avenue for connection, the sisters prayed with residents both verbal and nonverbal. The nursing home visits, which began as an American Heritage Girls activity, with the troop operating out of the church, have now transitioned to a lay ministry in which Cobb is still a key organizer. People of different denominations from throughout the community have begun contributing to the efforts. Sometimes, they are the only visitors for residents who wait to see them.

'With God, everything goes OK'

Ngwitu remembers seeing sisters serving as she grew up in the Catholic Church. She was 8 years old when she first felt inspired to eventually join religious life herself.

"Through them, I could feel God calling me to do the same," she said.

After high school, she earned college-level training in secretarial and accounting work. She built on that with training in counseling, which she put to work serving youth in Nairobi.

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Blakely is a far cry from Nairobi's bustling markets and skyscrapers. Ngwitu stands out in the community not only for her unique appearance but for her leadership in an area where a racial divide still exists distinctly. The U.S. Census Bureau puts the city's population at about 21% white and 78% Black as of 2024, but Blakely elected its first Black mayor only when Travis Wimbush took office in 2019.

In the 1990s, a citizen's group defending civil rights of Black residents settled a lawsuit with the city alleging that the local fire department was made up largely of Ku Klux Klan members who declined to provide adequate service in Black neighborhoods, resulting in the deaths of two young people. The New York Times reported at the time that no monetary damages the parents of the deceased sought were actually paid but that the city had called for a firefighter who had admitted to taking a role in cross burnings to resign.

Despite any lingering racial tensions, Ngwitu's work has flourished. When she first arrived and was serving alongside Abonyo in the public schools, the sisters took time to talk about racial harmony and its possibilities in the face of God's love.

At this point, Abonyo has moved on from ministry through Holy Family. Ngwitu has continued to serve. She's identified her ministry niches, and she's made a home and connections here. She regularly visits a detention center in Stewart County where she counsels inmates and their families.

She still visits the schools by invitation, and she makes an extensive round of nursing homes throughout Glenmary's service area each week, playing board games with residents, praying with them and encouraging them.

Serving on her own without Abonyo has been an adjustment, but the Holy Spirit, she said, has paved her way forward.

"With God's grace, everything is possible," she said. "With God, everything goes OK because he gives us strength."