Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Spirituality



Mercy Sr. Jennifer Wilson and Hope Phiri pose in Zambia before Phiri's wedding. (Courtesy of Katie Willert)



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I stood at the ATM unsure of how to convert the amount of money I needed from U.S. dollars to Zambian kwacha. Hope stepped in and told me the amount I needed. My mind flashed back to a moment nine years ago where Hope, a student I taught at Mount Mercy Academy in Buffalo, New York, was on a service trip with me in Guyana. I helped Hope understand how much the items she wanted to buy would be in U.S. dollars.

Hope attributes that trip to why she decided to minor in missions in college. She is now a teacher and missionary in Zambia. Her husband, who is from Zambia, works at the same missionary organization. I was able to attend her wedding in Zambia, and it was an incredible experience. Several times during that trip, her parents would say "It is because Sister Jenny invited Hope to Guyana that we are here."

On the same trip, I also spent a week in Zimbabwe with the sister of a woman I accompanied through a difficult time in her life. Her sister is from Malawi and was able to visit me. She is only 19 and has few opportunities due to poverty and lack of opportunity in her country. We had so much fun discovering Zimbabwe together.

Before I went on my trip to Africa, I helped host service trips at the border in Texas where I live. High school students and young adults came together with the local community to provide summer camp activities for children. I remember watching a student who was going to spend a month in Rome and a young girl from the area laughing together. Two very different realities and yet beautiful moments of connection. During those weeks this summer I heard people on the service trips reflect that the people who live on the border are more like them than different.

The other day I was trying to cook something, and I knew my mom would know what I should do. I didn't call her because that would have involved a conversation and talking to my dad. I wanted a simple solution, not one that was going to take time. I Googled it and was instantly annoyed. I should have just called my parents and connected with them.

A simple question Googled these days gives you way more information than needed. Artificial intelligence is changing the access to the information we have. The way we access it and engage with it is also different. I was given several prompts that basically said "tell me exactly what you want to do and I will give you the answer." I talk back to those prompts every time, saying "you are a computer, you are not an I."

My dad and I recently had a funny conversation with Alexa. I forget exactly what I asked, but the answer was so much more personal than I was expecting. You really could start to forget that this was not a real person. Anything that takes us away from connection with real people is a slippery slope.

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I recently had to stage an intervention for myself by removing Instagram and Facebook from my phone. I changed my Facebook password to something I will not remember and have to look it up if I want to access it. This is because the reels on both these social media sites are addicting to the point that it is ridiculous. At night when I am tired and my self-control has disappeared, I could waste a lot of time looking at the glossed over videos of other people's lives.

My question to myself is why? There is no reason to be doing this. It is true that it can be harmless. If it becomes what you do when you have a spare second, then it is a problem. If you know me well don't be surprised if you get a crocheted washcloth or other item for Christmas. This is my newest obsession to avoid endless scrolling.

The stories of connection I told earlier could not have happened without risk. It is a risk to involve yourself in any way with someone else. People are amazing and so complicated at the same time. It is way easier to have an AI companion on your phone and chat with it. Easier and not risky. It was a risk all those years ago to connect with Hope and invite her on the trip to Guyana. It led to a beautiful mutual relationship with her and her family.

We can miss beautiful moments because something on our phones is more important than a smile or simple hello. My interactions with people are often the moments where I see God. My interactions with the people in Zambia, Zimbabwe and on the border this summer gave me so many opportunities to reflect on the

presence of God in others. Moments made possible by the real power of connection.

Take a little time to reflect on the past few days. Where are the small and bigger moments of connection? Think a moment about your computer and social media use. Does how you use it get in the way of real connection and how can you change that? I have to be aware of this almost daily so that I am not using AI and social media in a way that interferes or fills up my brain with unnecessary chatter. Doing this opens the space to find God in the people I meet and allows them the same opportunity.