

Seeds of Hope ~ Planted in Love

by Sister Mary Finnerty Gabrielle ~

Known as Sister Vincent, a Sister of Mercy
 Pictured here with some of her staff at the
St VINCENT de PAUL HEALTH CLINIC
 in MUHORONI, WESTERN KENYA



Picture taken in 2007

I'd like to tell you about a lady who as a nurse/midwife/manager has worked in Kenya for 27 years, she is known to her patients and staff as simply: 'Sister Vincent'.

In the summer of **2005** I was most privileged to stay for one month at the **Sisters of Mercy Convent** in the **Muhoroni Mission** of **western Kenya**, East Africa. I was given great hospitality by Sister Vincent, 'Gabby' to her friends, an Irish nun whose home convent of *Werneth Grange* is in **Oldham, Manchester**. Everyone made me feel very welcome. At 62 years old, the reason for my being there was to carry out a research project for a 15,000 word MA Dissertation:

"An Analysis of the effects of Ageism, Gender Discrimination and Poverty on Older Women of the Luo Tribe, who live in Muhoroni Division, Kenya."

(My tutors had said "be specific!")

Kenya is a multi-ethnic society, but the *Luo Tribe* forms 13% of Kenya's people, and is the 3rd largest tribe in Kenya. Actually the *Luo* are the majority in Muhoroni

Division and they are mostly very poor. Sometimes the men will go off to look for work leaving mothers to care for their families alone. I met quite a number of young women who were destitute after their husbands had died prematurely (often of HIV/AIDS). This situation is worsened when the mother also dies leaving orphaned children, who, if they are 'lucky', will receive a surviving grandmother's care.

My research involved speaking with several focus groups, carrying out informal interviews and distributing questionnaires. The women were amazed to be asked *their* opinions! My findings were shocking in that violence against women was accepted as the norm. I would say that ageism and negative judgemental attitudes against both older men and women were evident. No old people's homes here! A British Catholic Priest, *Fr. Tony* was hoping to open one near his church in nearby **Koru**, and I'm told that the *Little Sisters of the Poor*, who care for the elderly, are in Nairobi. The need is huge. Many of those I spoke to could not believe I was interested in older people's rights, let alone the '*gender*' issue. Some people told me to "forget it and build an orphanage!" And of course, there *are* a million children living in the most appalling conditions in the slums of Nairobi.

Surely some of the most deprived older people on earth live in Muhoroni, in their corrugated iron homes. But women have fewer life chances than the men-folk, often with multiple pregnancies and inadequate nutrition contributing to ill health in old age. Kenya has the most unequal society on earth, when comparing rich and poor.

Mainly a Christian area, about 46% is *Catholic* in the township. Newly built *Muhoroni* parish church has *Our Lady Queen of Peace* as Patron. Few could speak English, so there was a language barrier, so *Francis* a Kenyan who worked as a catechist also acted as my interpreter! However I did find most folk very spiritual and they *are kind* people, sharing easily from what little they had.

Muhoroni town is right in the middle of the sugar-belt region, 80km from the western city of Kisumu, which is on the shores of Lake Victoria. There is mile upon mile of lush farm-land, even though it is on the equator. The altitude – it is well above sea level – means that they do not *usually* suffer extreme drought to the same degree as some of the areas to the north of Kenya. Nairobi too is on a plateau and the temperature is actually more moderate than, say, Mombasa at the coast, which is a magnet for tourists as well as being a busy port.

So what did I find out? Well, HIV/AIDS, Malaria, Tuberculosis and Urinary Tract Infections are widespread. Also common are water-borne diseases, due to poor water supply, and strange insect diseases. The people are *hungry*. A Kenyan Civil Servant in the city may well retire on a pension, but for this farming community, there are no state benefits at all. Old people, widows, orphans, the sick get no

financial support from the state. Most often this is compounded by unemployment, poor roads, lack of infrastructure etc.

Sister Vincent therefore is doing a fantastic job in nursing some very poor people and delivering their babies. Since **2002** she has built the ***St Vincent de Paul Health Centre***, brick by brick on top of a swamp after first concreting it over, a skill often employed by missionaries apparently. At that time, herself and two teachers (Sr. Agnes and Sr. Mairead) were working at *Bola Mission*, in another part of Kenya. When they were asked to move to Muhoroni by **Archbishop Okoth**, they left everything they had built up for 15 years *to a local Order of Sisters* and set off for Muhoroni to start all over again in **April 2002**. Sister Vincent told me that that is the Sisters of Mercy's contribution to the Developing world. Unfortunately *Sister Agnes died of Malaria in 2003 and Sister Mairead soon followed her colleague*, leaving Sr. Vincent alone. However she does get visitors from abroad (such as me) as well as her sister-nuns and religious who visit occasionally. After building her hospital she has started many community development initiatives. Sister has also continued the modernisation of the two primary schools sadly left unfinished by her two friends.



In June **2013** Sister Vincent journeyed home for a brief visit to her home base at Werneth Grange Convent for the **150th anniversary** celebrations of the Sisters of Mercy coming to **Oldham**. Later that week I also travelled to Oldham, to renew that acquaintance with this heroic nun. (*Although perhaps all missionaries are heroes.*) A nice chat, a cup of tea, and a slice of Madeira cake – a dignified epilogue to meeting that unforgettable Sister of Mercy and my adventure into another world. And yes, I got that MA!

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