



## FRUITS OF ARLINGTON MESSENGERS OF HOPE

I write of a WUCWO-inspired collaboration between a woman in Cameroon (Africa) and myself. We became acquainted at the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO) 2006 General Assembly in Arlington, Virginia which was an effort for both of us to attend.

As International Concerns Chair for my Diocesan CCW it is a privilege to choose and present a particular global need to our membership for their support. I prayed that the Assembly would provide opportunity as I prepared to travel to Virginia. Our hotel was filled with 800 of the most beautifully diverse women I'd ever seen, the joy present was tangible.

I met a group of women from Tatum, Cameroon. One named Clara Njisi told me of her work as a nurse midwife at a local Health Centre which also treated women and children with HIV/Aids. She spoke with passion and compassion for her people as she shared their many needs. I sensed God leading me into the unknown, I could choose to follow or walk away from this opportunity. Feelings of solidarity with Clara welled up in me and following the beautiful closing liturgy of the Assembly Clara and I exchanged addresses and our slow but steady collaboration began.

She has been eager to enlighten me about the diversity of the Clinic's work and the many educational needs of the local children. With time we began to bond in purpose, and realized our God-given resolve for the success of this collaborative endeavor. The gift of courage which empowers women like Clara enables them to face the challenges of AIDS and oppression in their country.

Clara and I had to learn to overcome communication challenges. [For example, she must travel and pay to use a computer, so initially we connected sporadically on a superficial level. Early cell phone service to Africa was unreliable and my inability to understand her caused frustration.] Over the years we have often been out of touch for months at a time, we have learned patience and to trust divine timing in the process.

As I became more confident that the donated funds would be spent as directed in Cameroon, I endeavored to find the most secure vehicle for the transfer of funds. I contacted Catholic Relief Services, but their funds are always directed to the area of the world where need is greatest. This would not meet the needs of our project. Another mentor, Mrs. Margaret Ekindi a Cameroonian living in Boston whom I also met at the WUCWO Assembly, recommended the use of Moneygrams. In 2009 all involved on both continents finally determined that Moneygram transfer would be used to safely transfer funds to Cameroon for mutually agreed upon purposes.

As for accountability, Clara sends itemized reports of how all funds are spent. The schools send the names of the children whose families receive scholarships.

[I had no knowledge of Cameroon so my research began. The Catholic Relief Services website led me to contact with one of their Field Workers in Cameroon. In 1961 CRS began working in Cameroon primarily to reduce under-five mortality through child survival programs. Later, CRS transitioned to health and HIV programming. Their current focus is on supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) and community health (including water and sanitation). CRS focuses on placing AIDS orphans with their local relatives or neighbors, many of these families are suffering from disease and poverty themselves so Project Hope supports the families with food, health care, education, and support groups. A recurring theme for Catholic Relief Services is that of unbinding people from traditional ways of doing things that are not healthy, and helping them understand what they can do to transform their societies.

I learned from my CRS contacts that the St. Pius Health Centre where Clara works had both a Project Hope and an OVC Program which are CRS-facilitated programs. This gave confidence in the credibility of the clinic, which I was advised was an important requirement.]

To encourage donations for the Project, our Board voted to use our Polly Pollard (deceased member) Legacy Fund to match the donations of our Diocesan women.

When Father Njingti came from Cameroon on a sabbatical visit in 2011-12, we gave a power point presentation about the Project at one of DCCW events promoting the fund-matching idea. Many women gave the \$25 it costs to educate one child for a year, which actually educated 2 children.

Funds have also been raised by raffles at our Diocesan events, also by placing mason jars on tables at these events with a ruler and pencil in them indicating money placed inside will help educate needy children, water pitchers are used to gather donations for a town well water

endeavor. Marian Smith donates and sells her delicious jams and Divine Fair Trade Chocolate with proceeds benefiting the Project. The children in my home parish collected "Coins for Cameroon" as a Lenten 'Rice Bowl' project.

Thousands of dollars have been donated and sent to Tatum since 2009. The number of children receiving tuition, books, uniform's and supplies increases each year; a small Doctor's residence has been built, water storage built, 2 computers and accessories have been purchased, major school repairs and clinic repainting have also been accomplished through the generosity of God's people. Classroom libraries (\$50 each) are on their wish list and additional computers (\$300).

My parish priest wished to do more than send financial assistance, he wanted a spiritual/pastoral collaboration with the Catholic parish in Tatum, which is the location of the Clinic and schools. Over time, committees in both countries shared his vision of a Parish Partnership and it was indeed formed by Fr. John Njingti of St. Pius Parish in Tatum, Cameroon and Fr. Christopher Derda of St. Ann Parish in Augusta, Michigan.

The fruits of that 2006 Assembly have continued to ripen in unexpected ways. The Kalamazoo Diocesan Council of Catholic Women and individual SW Michigan parishes actively support the families in Tatum, Cameroon through Clara and myself. I have not traveled to Cameroon yet, but it is my dream.

I believe that God wants to use us all  
as messengers of hope.  
When you feel his nudging be not afraid.  
*Respond humbly in faith,  
trust those with whom you serve  
and persevere.*

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