

## Missioner Narrative Stories

We have included here two of the Missioner Narrative Stories that we received. They give a sampling of the rich reflections missionaries wrote about their own lives and ministries.

### STORY #1 By Neil Kieffe, FSC

#### STAGE 1: Recalling your experience

In stage one, we ask you to recall your experience at a particular mission site.

1. Recall how, when, where and with whom this mission experience began.
  - a) Where and when was it?

My first and only overseas experience began in August of 1991 when I came to Bethlehem University in the Holy Land to serve with twelve other De La Salle Christian Brothers as the Director of Teacher Development and teacher of English. At the end of one semester I was asked to become the Vice President for Academic Affairs, a post I held for over 11 years until the Fall of 2003, when I became the Director of Instructional Technology.

- b) Who else was there?

Upon my arrival there were 13 Brothers in the community, six from the USA, five from the UK and one each from Ireland and Palestine. Most of the rest of the staff of the university were Palestinians, about 200 in number, assisted by about 10 other expatriates.

- c) What decisions did the people with whom you worked have to make?

We had to make all the decisions necessary to run a university.)

- d) How connected was the culture of this place to the rest of the world by media, trade, telecommunications, etc.?

Bethlehem, while still connected to its colorful past in many ways such as sheep grazing on grassy spots in the town, some use of donkeys for transportation and in the ways people relate to one another, is essentially a modern city with most of the features you would expect. However, the major factor preventing it from being fully in touch with the rest of the developed world is the Israeli occupation. For the past 37 years Bethlehem has been occupied by Israel. Israel restricts access to telephones, limits Palestinians freedom to move in and out of their own country, and in the past three years even prevents movement from one town to another within Palestine without a permit. Israel totally controls everything going to and from all of the West Bank and Gaza and thereby makes it impossible for any purely "Palestinian business" to flourish. All merchandise must first pass through the hands of an Israeli dealer.

- e) What expectations did you set for yourself?

I did not set any particular expectations for myself. As with all other assignments that I have been given to me since I became a Christian Brother I have simply tried to use my experience, talents, and other gifts to the best of my ability in the completion of my assigned mission.

2. Recall the changes that occurred during the course of the mission experience or up to present day if you are still at the site in response to this period of unprecedented global interchange (1990-2003).

a) Who else was/is there?

The Brothers Community at Bethlehem University has been rather stable over the past 13 years. There are currently 12 Brothers, four of whom have been here over the entire period. About 20 additional Brothers have served here during the period. Since the university serves the Palestinian people the Brothers work with about 235 local teachers, staff and administrators in planning and carrying out the educational program. Again, while the personnel serving at the university undergoes routine changes, it is probably more stable than similar institutions in the USA because of the lack of other opportunities in Palestine.

b) What new or different decisions did/do the people with whom you worked have to make?

Most of those who serve at Bethlehem University have basically the same objectives, so the change of personnel has not had a substantial effect on the Institution or its mission. The goal of Bethlehem University is to provide a quality higher education to Palestinians, especially Christian Palestinians, so that they do not have to go abroad to be trained. Young people who leave the country for their education often do not return. The challenge is to provide such an education under the extremely difficult pressures associated with the continuing Israeli occupation of Palestine and all the problems associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

c) How has the connection of the culture of this place to the rest of the world changed by media, trade, telecommunications, etc.?

Bethlehem is in many ways a modern, up-to-date, city with much in common with the developed world. But as mentioned in 1.d. above, the Israeli occupation has severely limited certain aspects of its development. Computers, television linked by satellite, faxes and the Internet are all part of the local scene. In recent years the widespread introduction of the Internet has given Palestinians the ability to communicate with the outside world much more easily than before. However, even today, Israel denies Palestinians access to high speed data lines which are available in Israel. This severely impedes setting up good quality teleconferences with the outside world. Travel, even to the center of Jerusalem, which is about 5 miles from Bethlehem, is impossible for most Palestinians. Some B.U. faculty members have not been there for 3 or more years. Since all trade must go through Israel it is extremely limited. This has had a devastating effect on the local economy. The creation of the Al-Jazeera television station in the Gulf Emirates has greatly improved the speed and honesty of reporting available on Arabic television. I believe this has and will continue to have an impact on behavior in the Arabic speaking world.

d) How did the expectations that you set for yourself change?

Because my personal goal was to do the best I could within what the circumstances allowed, I have not experienced much change in my personal expectations.

STAGE 2: Understanding what has changed

In stage two, use the items you have recalled above to examine in greater detail the way in which the world has changed for those with whom you lived and worked, as well as for you as a missionary. Refer

to the six Global Economic and Cultural themes (Consumption, Production, Migration, Political Relations, Social Relations and Religious Experience) defined in the handout as a lens to focus and round out your reflection.

1. What has changed among the people with whom you did/do your mission work?

Of the six Themes identified for this study the Palestinian people are affected by Political Relations far more than any others. The on-going conflict between Palestinians and Israelis shapes and colors everything in Bethlehem. In 1991 the first intifada was just ending. It had succeeded in bringing the world's attention to the problem, but had provided no solutions for the people. In 1993 the signing of the Oslo accords gave some fragile hope, but it was restrained by the prior experience of the Palestinian people. With the establishment of the Palestinian Authority there was again qualified hope with some good things happening in Bethlehem in preparation for the millennium and the celebration of what was known as *Bethlehem 2000*. The events following Ariel Sharon's visit to the Dome of the Rock in September 2000 and the beginning of the second intifada ended all that. Since that time four major invasions of Bethlehem by the Israeli army plus numerous smaller ones, destruction of streets, homes and shops as well as the assassination and jailing of many residents has had a profoundly negative effect on the people. A very high degree of unemployment in a town whose economy is based on tourism has reduced many of its citizens to or below the poverty level. Most recently, the construction of the barrier wall between Bethlehem and Israel has robbed many people of their land, separated 60 families from the rest of Bethlehem, and makes even less possible some menial work for day laborers within Israel. This further reduces the economy. It also could present Bethlehem University with very serious problems since 20% of the students and 25% of the faculty come from Jerusalem. The impact on the university will be disastrous if these teachers and students cannot reach the university.

Under these circumstances *Consumption* is focused on survival for most people. Production is drastically reduced for many, although services jobs such as teaching, health care, providing groceries and clothing, etc. continue, but at a reduced level because of the overall lack of funds. Migration is a serious problem as more and more Palestinians are giving up on the possibility of a decent life for themselves and their children in Bethlehem and are leaving the county. The number is not huge, but it is steady. Christians are leaving at a higher rate than Muslims. Christian families find it easy to immigrate because almost every family has relatives living abroad who are willing to sponsor the move and ease the transition into a new society. The fact that Christians traditionally have smaller families than Muslims, coupled with the immigration is quickly shrinking the percentage of Christians in the land to the point where it is now only about 2% of the population.

The *Religious Experience* is an important aspect of life for most Palestinians. There are no atheists in Palestine. Everyone is either Christian or Muslim, at least culturally. A person's identity is highly connected to his/her religion. Although there is a sizeable number of people who do not practice their religion to a meaningful degree, they still identify themselves as a member of one group or the other. The small number of Christians has the further disadvantage that they are subdivided into many competing sects. In Bethlehem the Greek Orthodox constitute the largest group (40%), followed by the Roman Catholics (21%), and the Greek Catholics (11%). The remaining Christians (28%) are divided among ten or more small groups, including a few Protestants. Religion is important for most people. Attendance at Sunday Mass is good. I believe that this is because it is part of the identity of the local Christian population. There is not a good understanding of Church dogma or the social aspects of the Gospel, and many Palestinians are very selfish beyond the boundaries of their own family. However, care for members of the extended family is very good, but I think that is a cultural trait and not a religious one.

2. How has your missionary culture and approach changed?

I do not believe that my approach to the work that I do has changed significantly. I believe I have a much better understanding of the people that I work with now than I did when I arrived.

STAGE 3: Evaluation of the impact of these changes on local people

In stage three, you are given the opportunity to evaluate how the changes that you have recalled impacted the local people.

1. How have these changes affected the local people/culture?

Because of the severe economic limitations associated with the current political situation there is not a great opportunity for *Consumption* to play an important role here. I believe that if collective income was greater it would be a serious problem. The extensive amount of cigarette smoking among males and the excessive addiction to use of the cellular telephone by many Palestinians are the bases for this statement.

The *Political Situation* colors everything. People cannot travel beyond their own town without Israeli permission, which is not easy to obtain. Their lives are centered on what is available in Bethlehem. They cannot plan for the future. Most want to stay, but question if it is fair to their children to bring them up in a situation which is so unnatural and without a promise of a better future. At the same time, there is a remarkable resilience visible in the Palestinian people. Politics are always on their minds and in the forefront of their attention, but life does go on – in a remarkably normal way. People get married, raise families, go to school and to work (if they have a job), on a daily basis. The Palestinians can adjust to new hardships quickly and remarkably. Conditions which are absolutely unacceptable in most of the world are accepted with a sigh and a quick, “This is our life.”

*Social Relations.* In addition to being pressured by the Israel occupation, a major concern of the Christian Palestinians is their relationship to the Moslem majority. Christians see their influence in the Holy Land decreasing steadily as their percentage of the total population continues to drop. Even in towns such as Bethlehem, which was 80% or more Christian in 1900, the population is now about 40% Christian. The percentage continues to decrease as Christians emigrate and Moslems replace them. The current intifada is encouraging more Christian families to leave their homeland. Almost all Christian families have relatives overseas who are willing to facilitate the move when the family decides that they can no longer accept the situation they are facing daily. Most families would prefer to stay, but say they are leaving for the sake of the children. Those left behind feel themselves becoming more isolated as they see their once strong influence in the country diminish. Most Christians are very fearful of Palestine becoming an Islamic state where their rights and influence will be minimal. Although in public they make a point of their strong solidarity with their Moslem neighbors, in private many are fearful of the future.

*Migration,* as mentioned in the previous paragraph, is a major problem facing Christian Palestinians. Although large numbers are not leaving every month, the exodus has been steady since 1900 which results in an ever decreasing percentage of Christians in the Holy Land. Even among those who are staying, many are quietly making preparations for the day they might have to leave by obtaining citizenship in foreign countries for themselves and their children.

The *Religious Experience* in the Holy Land is a very different one. Despite the fact that it is the birthplace of Christianity it is no longer the international headquarters of any Christian sect. The Latin Catholics are governed from Rome, the Greek Orthodox hierarchy all comes from Greece, the Copts leadership is in Egypt, the Lutherans in Europe, etc. The small number of Christians are sub-divided into many very small congregations. Although they see themselves as Christians first and secondarily as a member of a particular group, the division seriously weakens their ability to accomplish anything as a group. And, unfortunately, the desire of the laity to overcome some of the divisions and unite is not supported by the various hierarchies or even the priests, whose primary loyalty is to the source of their power base abroad. I have difficulty deciding exactly what role religion plays in the lives of local Christians. I see that many are very faithful with regard to church attendance, but at the same time there seems to be a very serious selfishness and lack of responsibility for the neighbor or any one beyond the extended family. At the same time family loyalty and support is extremely strong. That seems to be an Arab trait rather than a religious one, however.

#### STAGE 4: Reflecting on your personal experience of these changes

In stage four, you are given the opportunity to reflect on how the changes that you have recalled affected you personally.

##### 1. How do you feel about these changes?

The deteriorating political situation in Palestine has made it very difficult to concentrate on our mission of Christian education. The constant interruptions, the destruction of the property of the university, the inability of our faculty and students to reach the university, the inability to do really effective long-range planning all take one's attention from the essential business of effective Christian education. So much energy is absorbed in surviving that improving or even maintaining the previous standard of education is very difficult.

##### 2. How have these changes affected your approach to mission?

I find that in the period of 11 years that I served as Vice President for Academic Affairs I spent a huge amount of time making adjustments just to finish a school year with the proper number of days and very little time planning how to improve shortcomings in the instructional program. Also, very little time was devoted to improving the Christian character of the institution and on ways to improve the Christian-Moslem relations of our staff and students.

##### 3. How consistent or inconsistent with your spiritual values are these changes?

The work that I am unable to do because of the political situation does not conflict with my spiritual values. It just makes it more difficult to do what I think needs to be done and which I should be doing.

##### 4. Are you at peace within yourself with the current mission situation and your role in it, or are you fighting within yourself?

I am at peace with regard to my current mission situation. I think it is the nature of any mission situation to be severely handicapped by the situation in which one finds himself. The role of the missionary is to do the best he/she can under the circumstances.

## STAGE 5: Imagining the future of mission

In stage five, using these given assumptions

- that Globalization has had an effect on local cultures and the worldwide community;
- that new areas of missionary endeavors\* are advocated by Church documents.

\*Redemptoris Missio draws explicit attention to six areas or environments of mission: mega-cities, youth, migrants and refugees, the mass media, the new areas such as peace and care for the environment;

- that missionary endeavors are most fruitful when there is an integration of the key elements of mission: proclamation, witness, dialogue, spirituality and prayer, reconciliation and social transformation.

1. Imagine what kind of advice you would give to someone entering the mission field today.

My advice would be simply to trust in God to provide what is needed to accomplish His work and be ready to adapt to whatever the local situation calls for.

## STORY #2 By Elizabeth Wendeln, SCN

### **Stage 1: Recalling your experience**

In 1991 I first began ministry in eastern Kentucky. I was part of a Catholic Diocesan staff of six directors who had a center in Lexington, Kentucky and served fifty counties covering about sixteen thousand five hundred miles. We met with people in church centers in these Appalachian counties.

Leadership groups of various makeup emerged in each area and the people voiced their hopes and needs as well as their gifts and abilities. Some hopes included: opportunities for the youth to gather for healthy recreation with hopes that they wouldn't leave for the big city; food for families at the end of the month when money had been spent; care for the sick; home improvement especially after floods; good preaching in the church; times for women to get together, etc.

Media had used Appalachia for studies on many occasions. A chicken factory had been started in one county only to find that working conditions were unsafe and unfair. Soon most of the media and the "do-gooders" moved on to "save" other more workable situations. Coal mines had closed and the new generation did not have the skills to return to farming poor land which had now been contaminated in many cases. Outsiders felt bad but did not invest in the lives of the people and the cycle of poverty continued.

I hoped to be a listener and an encouraging presence where I could and to share resources of contacts and skills when appropriate.

The changes over time have been incremental and hopeful, while the physical conditions remain stressful and seemingly insurmountable.

The new drug oxycontin has invaded the area being distributed as samples by pharmaceutical companies. Alcoholism continues as jobs are lost and some people look for ways to numb the pain. Big

TV media has left except for some election opportunities and videos at the local store take the place of TV programs interrupted by so many commercials of things not available. Wal Mart has a big store between most towns for those with transportation. Those who work there are part-time and don't get health insurance. Private prisons are making business in the area where land is less expensive and workers are available. However, the workers have not had control of so much of life that they take control of the prisoners in ways that lack respect for the life of those imprisoned. Many prisoners are shipped from other states to be housed in poor Kentucky towns. One of the good things is Habitat for Humanity. In some towns a number of new homes have been built. People from different churches and organizations work together in these efforts.

The Catholic Church has changed. More people are involved in decision making. They have opportunities to collaborate in choosing those who minister with them. They speak to their needs, make decisions more freely and work together to effect some change. In a few cases where schools were on the verge of closing, fund raisers and recruitment succeeded because the people did the work themselves. A baby boutique is prosperous in one county because people saw a need to help new mothers. A new health clinic is active in one of the churches serving as many people as can fill the waiting room. Prayer groups are forming in some areas as a support to people who need a space to share needs with others and to offer these needs to God as a group in prayer. Ecumenical efforts have always been a part of the county efforts and these have better participation. People are finding their own voice not only in prayer but in self expression and critical assessment of situations.

Some changes were not foreseen. Thousands of Mexican workers are now in the counties. These people do the work on tobacco farms and horse farms which others choose not to do. Instead of migrating with the crops, more are now staying in the area. Efforts are being made to offer English as a second language and to organize centers where the Hispanic peoples can meet. Catholic churches offer Mass in Spanish and many churches are now working to integrate cultures within the congregation. Each culture has opportunities for special celebrations while learning to share space and resources so that the dominant culture does not make all the decisions. This will take much longer but it is starting. This is a challenge for the founding culture. Ecumenism is more challenging because other denominations are vying to increase their membership and are painting pictures of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the sides of vans and offering transportation to the Mexican Catholics to the Baptist or the new Testifying Church of Jesus.

Many transients have moved to the mountain areas where property is less expensive and the environment welcoming. People with New England accents living in an expensive home are next to the small farm with three rusting trailers where the children who returned to the family from their city experience try to make a go of it with more children than they can feed. Down the road is the old apartment complex now filled with the Mexican community trying to get a start. Diversity is complex for Appalachia.

Another change is the influx of clergy from different countries. Clergy coming from India, Vietnam and Nigeria are now a part of the church leadership. With fewer indigenous clergy, dioceses are inviting those of other countries to join them. A few have enculturation opportunities beforehand, but most do not. Facilitation among cultures is scarce and conflicts arise because of misjudgment and misinformation.

The Catholic Church has experienced the effects of clergy abuse of children and the mistrust this generates. In some cases fundamentalism is sweeping the area. The role of women is taking a step back. Many rural and mountain women have been kept at home by husbands who wanted their women to bear

children and have food on the table when they wanted it. The church supported women as long as they did not take the decision making positions which clergy possessed. Situations were emerging where greater freedom was experienced by women who made a difference, but these efforts are seen as a threat by some at the center of authority in the home or the church.

Expectations I had for myself have evolved. I am excited about the local leadership which has emerged over time in the churches and the counties. I feel that I have been able to be trusted by the people and have been accepted in my presence and encouragement as well as in my challenge of some situations. Relationship is the key element and only with this trusted relationship have I been able to minister with the people. They in turn minister with me. I expected to stay another five years with the people but my position in the Catholic Diocese has been terminated and no one will be continuing the ministry I love so much. I find joy in the fact that the people of the area will continue to speak and create new opportunities for local leadership to make a difference. I have already experienced this as I receive numerous messages of love, support and invitations come and stay awhile.

### **Stage 2: Understanding what has changed**

The world has changed for the people of rural and mountain Appalachian people of eastern Kentucky in some ways, and in other ways it holds the same challenges. People of diverse cultures have moved into the area brought new gifts and new needs. In some cases each culture forms its own closed community for support and in other cases the communities are watching one another just as mountain folk watch the city folk and visa versa. It took me at least three years to join in conversation in a trust relationship. In some cases it takes more. This same phenomenon is occurring in multiple ways at this time of history.

With closed coal mines and few opportunities for meaningful work, more young people are moving out of the area while seniors from different states are moving in to retire. This diversity is another cultural change.

Denominations are multiplying as churches split because of fundamentalist beliefs; small new denominations continue to emerge as a group of people find God in some new experience. Appalachia is not noted for many large denominational churches. New denominations emerge from the life experience and call of the Spirit in whatever “holler” people search for God. Ministers from various other countries as well as other states in the U.S. compete with local leaders for membership. A Catholic church may have a few members and several “watchers” at a Sunday service. Other Catholic churches may have an entire Sunday of worship, education and fun. People are taking more responsibility for deepening their faith. In the past the clergy spoke without too much critical response from the people. Now the people speak their own experience more readily.

My own missionary culture and approach has changed to one of reverence for the expression of those who live day in and day out in the towns and hollers of the area. I used to think that I had more to bring while I also had much to learn. Now I know that I have much to learn while I share who I am and let people explore the who I am by being present to them in simplicity and as a woman of prayer.

### **Stage 3: Evaluation of the impact of these changes on local people**

The changes of cultural diversity – people moving in from other countries and states- has initially caused a set back because each culture tries to keep and develop its own heritage. Slowly I see that this will call for all groups to come together even for some outside task.

Government problems occur with the challenge of the “undocumented” and the principle of justice for all peoples is lost in the controversy. The new business of prisons challenges the call for justice on all sides. Warehousing individuals and storing some on death row cries for justice.

I have experienced a different priority among the people. The role of the church in the community is secondary to the role of relationship and gatherings of those who “fit together”. If Mary has a birthday party or if the town baseball team is gathering, this takes first priority. Church needs to open boundaries and integrate with the community in ways that beliefs are revered and celebrations are respected. Denominations could work together rather than compete for membership.

Many people are confused and show wondrous patience or else just close their eyes to conflict in order to live with some personal peace. Coping with everyday needs has a natural priority.

#### **Stage 4: Reflecting on your personal experience of these changes**

Some of the changes make me angry. Principles of justice are many times secondary to politics either of the country, state, county or church. However, until the people can see and understand for themselves, things will not change much. By sharing my own stories and those of the people I meet, I encourage others to share their stories. In this way we can meet in our thinking and cause some movement. I find that presence and love are the most important gift one can bring. After one is accepted, one can ask questions which move thought which in turn moves to action.

My spirituality has been challenged. I believe that there is a new liberation theology which is emerging from the people today. The people teach me to value relationship and trust. In turn these values teach me to be a more integrated person who can sit and listen and “waste time” exploring life with others and with the God who moves among us. Directions and actions emerge from life. Boundaries become more porous and we connect in new ways which some may not believe acceptable. Structures are falling apart in some places and are emerging in others. Reverence for mystery grows.

#### **Stage 5: Imagining the future of mission**

I believe that the love of God, the scriptures, reverence for the “other,” a heart sensitive to justice, a passion for wholeness...the universal...the oneness possible for us all... , dedication to speaking the truth in love, gathering with one another in the Spirit, etc., are primary for imagining a future of mission.

Archbishop Robert Weakland, osb, offers six ways to face the future with hope. I agree with him and share these with you: 1. Get a universal mentality, 2. Hear a common call to holiness, 3. Make the church and society more just, 4. Model the healing qualities of Jesus, 5. Be a healer among religions, 6. Be a healer in your own backyard...and his closing question is “How can I break down the barriers that divide us so we can dance together?”

To be in mission is to be “with people.” We need to imagine a people to whom we are called ... with whom we can dance. Some people can do this in one place better than another. Discernment of gifts and call needs to be given more attention. The Spirit is at work among us and we need to listen communally because different ears of the heart hear in ways to bring challenge and support to those called. Discern the call to mega-cities, youth, migrants and refugees, mass media, peace movements, care for the environment, rural communities, working within a system or outside a system, etc.

Collaboration among various groups is needed. In the past some claimed a mission as owned by some group. Sponsorship may be needed for gathering support – both monetary and personnel – yet the mission is always that belonging to the people. Many groups may interact to bring about life. No one group has all the answers.

True integration and not subjection of cultures will continue to be a challenge. I believe that each of us needs to embrace our own way of being...our culture and heritage...and in turn learn from others who differ from us. As we do this we will learn that there is no one way to live mission. Diversity is increasing and we are enriched.

My advice would include: find someone(s) with whom you discern your call to mission. Include gifts and weaknesses. Pray with a group to discover where your gifts might be needed. Find a sponsoring group who will pray with you and support you in ways mutually agreed upon so that you may go to live among a people to listen and learn from them what the mission or call is in that community. Seek a relationship among the people which gives evidence that you can be in mission with them. Learn to dance the dance of the people in a multicultural way. Give room for the Spirit to unfold in the mystery of the music. Learn the way by walking.