

New Assignment for the Birchalls

Eudist Associates and Lay Missionaries Frances and Walt Birchall recently ended their two-month visit home to head back to Africa and to undertake their new assignment. They leave behind Matiri Mission, situated in Kenya about a three and a half hour drive northeast from the capital city of Nairobi, where Walt was principal of the Youth Polytechnic School and Frances a nurse in the Pharmacy and Dispensary.

In their new assignment, they will both be helping a CFCA (Christian Foundation for Children and the Aged) program with Sr. Joanne Gangloff, a Franciscan nun from the United States, in Nanyuki, which is about two hundred miles from Nairobi and, at an altitude of six thousand feet, has a cooler climate than Matiri. This organization works with 2,200 children in three dioceses; its plan is to increase help for another one thousand children within the year.



During their visit home the Birchalls described to various audiences their work at Matiri Mission. Frances spoke about her work in the Dispensary, where major surgery is not performed. Women go there to deliver their babies because the nearest hospital is thirty miles away. Many wary of Caesareans at any rate and would refuse that option if it were necessary.

Good tarmac roads are one and a half hours away, so often women check themselves in when near their term because getting to the Dispensary quickly is a problem. Some women have been brought in on bicycles or in wheelbarrows. One woman died on the way; fortunately, another woman shared her breast milk, and her baby girl survived. Without another woman to look after a newborn baby and available fresh milk, it is impossible for the new father to care for the baby. As a result, the

Mission started building an orphanage to care for the semi-orphaned babies until they are older. There's another benefit for the Kenyans near the Mission; with money donated by Italian non-governmental organizations, construction of a hospital with a little over one hundred beds and an operating theater had been started at the time the Birchalls completed their assignment.

The Dispensary with its tin roof often was unbearably hot, electricity and water at a premium. The heat adds to the misery of the many patients with malaria, and AIDS is a major problem. The women stay at home to take care of the children and the garden, while the men go off to the big cities like Mombasa to get work where they become infected with AIDS. They get home only two or three times a year but manage to pass the virus on to their wives.

As part of their mission to Matiri, they requested donations from people to start the St. James Mission Fund to sponsor children in school.

From their previous mission assignments, Frances and Walt learned that many Kenyan children were unable to go to school because their families didn't have the money for school fees. They were able to sponsor thirteen children with the funds received for the two years spent in Matiri schools. They wish to continue sponsoring these thirteen children (who are not eligible for support from CFCA) until the children complete secondary school. Currently, five are in secondary school. To contact these children e-mail Walt at waltmateri@yahoo.com.

Another aspect of education is that boys are educated first, if there is money in the family. Then if there is any money left over, a girl might be sent to school. In order that these fortunate girls could attend school even though they lived at a great distance, Walt converted some unused staff quarters into dormitories. About 30 percent of the children don't complete primary school, and of those that do, 50 percent don't go to secondary school. It costs approximately \$250 per year to send a child to secondary school.

The Birchalls became interested in missionary work as a result of their involvement with St. James Mission Circle in Tijuana. At the suggestion of Sr. Grace Ann Loperena, CSJ, former pastoral assistant at St. James Parish, they contacted Lay Mission Helpers of Los Angeles, which sent them first to Sierra Leone and then to Kenya. All their St. James and Eudist friends wish them many blessings and much success in their new venture in Nanyuki.