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## Chapter 4. Making a Way: USA Spiritan East Africa Mission, 1923 to the Present

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## Chapter 4

# Making a Way: USA Spiritan East Africa Mission, 1923 to the Present

“I was a stranger, and you welcomed me” (Matt 25:23)

“Young religious have a very great vocation and should be trained in apostolic zeal to go to the frontiers, territories”<sup>1</sup>

And there we were in New York’s John F. Kennedy airport on a cold winter night, four young Spiritan missionaries, full of life—Vincent Stegman, Ned Marchessault, Don McGregor, and Joe Herzstein—looking forward to our journey and new life in Tanzania, East Africa. We were flying high on the wings of Vatican II. Good Pope John XXIII called us not to be afraid, to be open, to open the windows of the church and let fresh air in. We are to respect every culture, every tradition, every conscience, knowing that the mission of the church is the work of the Holy Spirit and we are its ambassadors. He bid us be ready to wash the feet of everyone we meet. What a wonderful outlook on life! Such openness, acceptance, respect and calm, gentle kindness to others. This is *aggiornamento* and the new understanding of ourselves as church. This was good Pope John and his inspiring leadership.

I sometimes ask myself, and never come up with a clear answer, how it is that the four of us were gifted and blessed with a long and full life in mission *ad gentes*? McGregor after five years in Tanzania left the Spiritans and joined his home diocese. However, he soon asked his bishop if he could go to the Hawaiian Islands as a missionary. He lived and worked in Hawaii until his death. Ned and Vince, after ten years among the Maasai left to be part of the pioneer group to begin evangelization among the Borana people of southern Ethiopia.

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1. Pope Francis, *L’Osservatore Romano*, February 27, 2020.



Fr. Hertzstein and elders blessing new fire at start of mass

In 1986 Ned returned to Tanzania to continue his work of primary evangelization among the Maasai. Vince remained in Ethiopia until he retired, after forty years in Boranaland. Think about what has happened here. The District of Kilimanjaro, just a few years into the direct preaching of the Gospel to the Maasai and addressing other needs of the Diocese of Arusha, saw the need to reach out to the unevangelized indigenous people of Ethiopia. This new mission to Ethiopia was a joint undertaking with the American Spiritans in Kilimanjaro and the Dutch Spiritans in Bagamoyo.

Although we ourselves still had pressing needs in Arusha and the District of Kilimanjaro, we were not afraid to reach out to others, giving them the opportunity to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ. What is important is our motivation, what gets us moving, and the focus of our dreams that lead to action. The real weakness in the world today is the loss of confidence in the efficacy of one's vocation.<sup>2</sup> Vatican II gives a new awareness and understanding of freedom of conscience, openness to the Word of God and the everyday presence of the Holy Spirit in the world and church.

## **Community for Mission**

When we arrived in Arusha, we found a small but great group of Spiritan missionaries with a strong commitment to service. There was a willingness to share

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2. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (Harper and Brothers, 1960) 42.

and help each other, to encourage each other and not to be afraid to try new things and to be always ready to meet new people with different ideas and way of life. Father Libermann who brought new life to the Congregation through his desire to seek justice and freedom for those in slavery would say that what is most important is our acceptance and respect for other people and their culture. Jacob Libermann was raised in a Jewish ghetto, so he experienced the warmth and security of a closed society. As a young man going out of the ghetto and studying for the Rabbinic pastorate, he began to notice the evil of exclusion and the weakness of narrow thinking. His reading of the New Testament and his experience of the outside world not only brought him to the Catholic Church but also gave him a new broad understanding of acceptance and respect for others. No one is useless, and so, the need is there to reach out to the poor and those on the peripheries of life. For Spiritans, the periphery is the center.

Looking back on Father Libermann's life you can see the Holy Spirit at work preparing him to be a great missionary leader of the poor and unevangelized. He never set foot in Africa, but his insight was to let people be as they are, to respect culture: "do not try to change people or make them Europeans." We find it difficult to change ourselves, how can we change others? This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

I am always surprised at how much alike the thinking of Father Libermann and Pope Francis is. Pope Francis writes:

[. . .] an attitude that is gentle, pleasant and supportive, not rude and coarse [. . .] Kindness ought to be cultivated; it is no superficial bourgeois virtue. Precisely because it entails esteem and respect for others, once kindness becomes a culture within society it transforms lifestyles, relationships and the ways ideas are discussed and compared. Kindness facilitates the quest for consensus. It opens new paths where hostility and conflict would burn bridges."<sup>3</sup>

In March of 1963 after the first session of Vatican II and just three months before the death of John XXIII, the new diocese of Arusha was created and the bush missionary, Dennis V. Durning, CSSp, was made the first bishop of the diocese of 26,000 sq. miles. We began with only five parishes: Arusha, Usa River, Monduli, Loliondo and Kijungu. There were twelve American Spiritans,

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3. Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* On Fraternity and Social Friendship (October 3, 2020) nos. 223, 224.

one local diocesan priest, two Spiritan Brothers, four Precious Blood Sisters, and about twenty local catechists. The diocese was made up of four different tribal groups: Wameru, Waarusha, Wasonjo and Wamaasai. The three so-called town parishes of Arusha, Usa River, and Monduli had a large number of people from all over Tanzania. The indigenous people of the diocese were largely unreached, untouched, and unevangelized. The people were to be at the heart of our work and life. Strong personalities inspired by the Gospel and one another gave life and energy to the group, far beyond its small number.

The diocese was divided into two deaneries, Arumeru and Maasai. We met for two days every three months. The Bishop mostly sat and listened, as everyone shared ideas, frustrations, problems, and successes. These meetings were most helpful because of the honesty, openness, and true concern for the mission of the church. These meetings were a true example of solidarity, although at the time we never thought of them as that. Always holding on to the spirit of the Gospel and remembering the advice of Libermann to the Sulpician, Fr. Cahier, who was gravely ill: “In my opinion, you must not get upset because of the difference between what you can do and what you would like to do. Don’t push things, be stable and wait upon God to show you what he wants [ . . . ] leaving everything in his hands.”<sup>4</sup> All of us, even the new guys, had something to contribute but clearly it was Eugene Hillman, Ed Kelly, and Vincent Donovan that kept the group alive and excited to be bush missionaries in Maasailand. What a wonderful life to share the Good News for the first time with the Maasai people.

## **Enfleshing the Gospel in a Culture**

Hillman got the ball rolling when in the late 1950s and early 1960s he travelled the 500-mile stretch between Loliondo and Kijungu–Kiteto visiting all of the cattle markets. He made friends with the elders, building a store of good will between the Maasai and the missionaries that we benefit from even today. Before I left Maasailand in Ngorongoro, I met a visiting elder from South Maasailand who told me of the missionary he met years ago with a hole in his chin and who helped him in time of need. Gene Hillman of course. I cannot tell you how touched I was to see this very old man relate the good deeds of a fellow Spiritan. In the early days Gene as well as Bishop Durning, Ray Buchler, Ed Raszewski, Brother Francis, Bill Jackson, and others, set up schools, dis-

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4. See *A Spiritan Anthology* (presented by Christian de Mare, CSSp; Rome: 2011) 76–77.

pensaries, food relief programs, and a hospital to help improve living conditions. Later, Pat Patten established a flying medical service and a school for the disabled.

Religion was taught in the primary schools. One year before the students would leave to return home, if they wished, they were baptized. The idea was they would have a year to practice their faith. We soon realized this was not working because they had no Christian community to go to. A Christian without a community is like fish out of water. We all knew something more was needed.

Just about the same time, Donovan was in Loliondo mission writing to Bishop Durning saying. "I suddenly feel the urgent need to cast aside all theories and discussion, all efforts at strategy and simply go to these people and do the work among them for which I came to Africa."<sup>5</sup> Here is the beginning of the direct evangelization of Maasai. It started in 1966. The thinking of both Hillman and Donovan was this:

We come not to transplant a parish from New York or Dar es Salaam to some place in Maasai country but to en flesh the Good News of Jesus in this unique people and in their unique way of living and solving the problems that arise in the environment in which they live themselves. They are to feel at home in their local church and at the same time recognize they are part of a Universal Church.

We designed our teaching and liturgy that it be an outgrowth and completion of their traditional beliefs and practice. We prayed and sang in their language, adopting their religious symbolism and prayer forms.

We began by calling a meeting of the elders. We tell them that we would like to speak with them of God. We acknowledge that the Maasai know God from time immemorial. We explain that we come to talk with them of the one God that they know. We ask if we might come regularly to speak with them. If they agree (and most do,) we go to the place each week for a meeting of prayer and discussion/teaching.

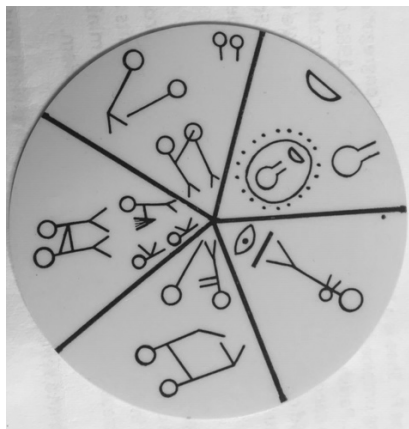
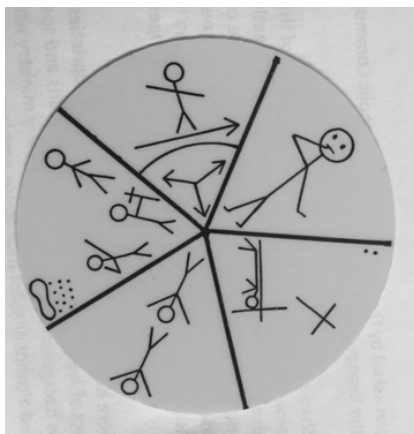
We emphasize that we do not bring a new or foreign God but the one God whom they know. We remind them of the Maasai legend of the beginning of the world that speaks of the origin of both good and bad things that they experience.

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5. Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides, 1978) 15.

Also, we tell the Bible story of creation and our first parents. We emphasize that the explanation of the origin of sin and evil found in the Bible and that of the Maasai legend have the same meaning. We humans, not God, are responsible for the present situation. This initial teaching is key because the Maasai traditionally believe that God directly causes drought, sickness, and death.

Maasai Bible



**Side One.** 1) Incarnation/Eye of Faith; Light and Darkness. 2) Lazarus is brought to life/relationships with Jesus, Son of God, and one another. Do you want a good relationship with Jesus and Others? 3) Forgiveness: The story of the mercy of the Father and His two Sons/God loves us and forgives us. We also must forgive one another. 4) Parable of the Good Samaritan/turn the other cheek. Everyone is my neighbor. 5) Eucharist: Bread and Wine, Body and Blood of Christ/We gather as one to eat and share and to get strength to live the Christian life together.

**Side 2.** 1) Passion and Death of Jesus/We too must carry our Cross. 2) The Resurrection/life after death—We too will rise. 3) Prayer/We pray in the name of Jesus. We pray the Our Father and may His will be done. 4) Ascension/Like arrows going in all directions we go to the Ends of the Earth to share the Word of God. 5) The Holy Spirit and the church/Like the body that has different parts, yet all are important, so the church has different gifts. The Holy Spirit watches over and guides us all.

We continue teaching Old Testament stories, highlighting people such as Abraham, Moses, and the shepherd King David. We soon realized that many teachings from the Old Testament caused confusion among the people as to the importance of Jesus as the central figure of Christianity. So, we decided to leave out the Old Testament until after baptism, except for the creation story. Also, we felt the teaching pictures we were using were more a distraction than a help. It was decided to simplify our teaching – be clear and direct. It was at this time that Ralph Poirier composed the Maasai Bible, as it came to be called. Ralph chose ten events and parables that embraced the basic Good News of Jesus (*Kerygma*). The design of the Maasai Bible had five events on each side of the circle, stick figures were used. The Maasai Bible became a first-class teaching tool for all. The women being creative cut a round piece of cowhide and with their beads sowed the ten basic teachings onto the cow skin. Now they had their own teaching tool.

This is what Roland Allen, an Anglican Missionary working in Uganda in the 1920s, would call spontaneous expansion. And so, the word of God is passed on and shared with others. “To be holy means to be open. If God is present to you, all things are possible. There is no limit to what you can become.”<sup>6</sup>

Today the Archdiocese of Arusha has fifty-four parishes, with 130 churches and many outstations. There are sixty-five diocesan priests and eighty-seven religious from different congregations. Yet, most of these parishes are in town. Few priests, the world over, want to go to the frontier territories—the outback, the bush, the traditional people, the inner-city, street people and refugees.

Another great gift was the starting of the formation of local Spiritans on African soil. This idea of East African Spiritans was led and inspired by Father George Croceni, the district superior of Kilimanjaro, together with our four Tanzanian Spiritans: Fathers Joe Babu, Francis Mketa, Josaphat Msongore and Bishop Bernard Ngaviliau. The new district superior, Tom Tunney, together with the Spiritan leadership in Bagamoyo, Kenya, and Congo Kinshasa began to



Archbishop Josaphat Lebulu receives a Maasai staff, a symbol of leadership

6. Ibid., 137.



establish houses of formation with a clear stress on a missionary spirit of services to the poor, the unevangelized and refugees. Uganda joined the East African project when it established a firm presence in Uganda.

## **Like a Mustard Seed Growing**

The fast growth of East African Spiritans prompted Joe Herzstein, the district superior of Kilimanjaro, together with Augustine Shao, now Bishop of Zanzibar, to begin to discuss and dialogue about the future leadership of the area with all our members. We asked the general administration in Rome to suppress the District of Kilimanjaro in favor of the East African Foundation in Tanzania. This was accomplished in April of 1993. The superior general, Pierre Schouwer, with a big smile said he was very happy to suppress the District of Kilimanjaro. He felt this was an example for the rest of the Congregation to follow. Today the Spiritan leadership in Africa is African. The Tanzania Province has 159 members serving the poor in all six continents.

It is a long way from 1923 when Fathers Thomas Harris and Patrick McCarthy came from America to work in the Vicariate of Bagamoyo and Father John Todorowski to work in the Vicariate of Kilimanjaro. Over the years, about seventy-six American Spiritan priests and five Spiritan Brothers have had the joy of living and sharing the Gospel with the people of Tanzania. As development continued, the Vicariate of Kilimanjaro was divided into seven dioceses and the Diocese of Moshi is seen as the heartbeat of Christianity in the whole of Tanzania. Moshi Diocese is small in area, 1,942 sq. miles, yet it has given more bishops than other areas to the church in Tanzania. In November 1959, Spiritan Joseph Kilasara, CSSp, was made bishop of his home diocese; he was the first African Spiritan bishop in Tanzania. Since then twelve local priests have been called to serve the Tanzanian Church at different times and in different places. At present, Moshi has over 200 diocesan priests. The number of priests from Moshi in the different congregations of men is hard to count. Also, the large number of local and foreign congregations of sisters receiving girls from Moshi is impressive. The church in Moshi is alive and well. We thank God for giving the Spiritans the gift and call to be the primary and essential workers in sharing the Word of God with the people of Moshi, Arusha, and Bagamoyo. Truly, it is the Spirit that gives life.

When I first came to Tanzania, particularly among the Maasai, I saw them as Old Testament people because of their prayer life, their love of blessings and fear

of curses, dietary laws and importance of family. Now that my days as a bush missionary with both the Maasai people and the *Wachagga* people are coming to a close, I think of them more as *Magnificat* people, people grateful to God for all that has been given to them—their life, culture, family, land, and cattle. God loves them and shows them his mercy as he has done from generation to generation. God is a God who cares for all his people. The advice of Pope Francis in *The Joy of the Gospel* is:

“Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm.”

“Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization.”<sup>7</sup>

I thank Ned Marchessault for permission to use part of his talk to us Spiritans at Tengeru on February 2, 2018.

*Joseph Herzstein, CSSp*  
*Arusha, Tanzania*

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7. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (Vatican: November 24, 2013) nos. 48, 49.