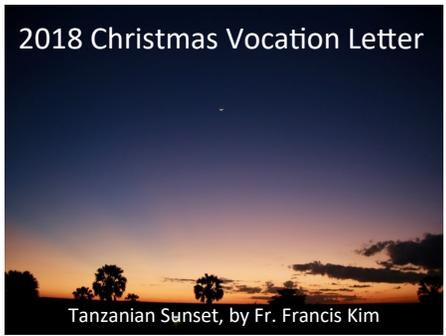




Societas Missionum ad Afros  
**S.M.A.**  
 Society of African Missions



S.M.A. Vocation Office

Priests, and Lay & Priest Associates

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## *The Time is Right: Responding to God's Call*

### **God's SMA Mission Journey for Deacon Rick Benner**

It all began when my wife Donna returned from a one year mission with the Sisters of Mercy. She wanted us then to go on a long-term mission but this was not in God's plan. God wanted to prepare us more. After I retired, our children now adults, God prepared me through different ministries and ordination to the Diaconate. I can truly say I was growing spiritually in my relationship with God.

I was in my comfort zone, but twenty months ago, in April 2017, God called us on mission and said the time is now to "Get out of the boat like Peter." My wife and I submitted our resumes to Catholic *Response*, an online website for those interested in mission service. Within a few days we received an invitation from Theresa to discern serving in an SMA Mission in Africa.

We accepted the invitation, completed our applications and made an initial visit in Sept. 2017 for 3 days to the SMA Fathers in Tenafly, NJ. During the visit, we



*Above (L—R): Donna Benner, Fr. Michael Moran, S.M.A. Provincial, and Deacon Richard Benner.* Photo taken following the Commissioning Mass on Dec. 8, 2018, in Tenafly, NJ.

felt a familiar "burning" in our hearts and knew this was to be our new home where God would plant us and where we would blossom.

In January 2018 we received our acceptance to SMA to begin our training in September 2018. Praise be to God. Father Moran, the Provincial of the American Province, coordinated our 12 weeks of training to prepare us to go on mission. The training was very informative on the SMA charism, organization and the SMA apostolates. We were very blessed to have as our instructors African Priests and experienced missionaries who shared their real life stories with us. I found the SMA Community very relaxing and

spiritual. For me the most important part of my Missionary Training was my relationship with God, through daily Liturgy of the Hours, daily Mass, Adoration, rosary, centering prayer, discernment and living in the SMA Community.

How true it is **God does not call those prepared—He prepares those He calls.** The entire SMA Community prepared me for His mission. I have been very blessed and I am very humbled and grateful for this opportunity to serve the Lord as an SMA Lay Associate and to represent the American Province. My prayer is God will give Donna and me the grace to be the light of Christ when on mission as those missionaries before us. *With the Love of Christ*  
*Deacon Rick Benner*

### **God's Journey for Donna**

My mission journey began in the Jubilee year of 2000 when I was reading the Bible and I realized that I wanted to be like those people in the Bible. They had done good things because of their

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## *The Time is Right: Responding to God's Call*

(Continued from Page 1) love for our Lord Jesus Christ. I wanted to be like the apostles and go and spread the Good News. I wished I was one of them. I prayed and said to God, "I want to be just like them. I want to do what they did." Then I laughed and thought to myself, "Girl, those are high expectations!"

I prayed and I prayed that God would answer my prayers. **Slowly over the years God was preparing me for mission.** I was involved in different ministries and my various employments were also preparing me for the future. Then I realized that God had a plan for me. I could see it unfolding. I had this burning desire to do God's work and to go on a mission.

Seventeen years later in April 2017, after I submitted an application to *Catholic Response* I received a call from the Society of African Missions. After a discernment weekend that we attended I knew from the bottom of my heart that this is where I want to be and this is where God wants me to be. I knew I was on the right track. It felt like home. In March 2017 we were accepted into the Society. On September 17, 2018 we started our formation process. I was especially drawn to the charism and the spirituality of the Society.

I felt comfortable living within the community and I felt right at home. They opened their home, their hearts, and shared their life stories. I have made many friendships. What I have learned from everyone is very valuable. The formation has prepared me and laid the foundation I need for a successful mission. They are modern day Saints! It was a gift from God that I was in their presence and I am grateful for that. I am very excited and sometimes at a loss for words that I am now going on a Mission to Nairobi, Kenya. I am truly blessed to be with the SMA as a Lay Associate and honored to represent the American Province.

*Donna Benner*



*Left:*  
**Richard and Donna Benner** stand near a photo of Fr. Ignatius Lissner, SMA, the Founder of the S.M.A. American Province.



*Above:* **Joe Worthington** making his commitment with S.M.A. for the fourth time.  
*Below:* Joe and friend in Ghana.

## *Peace in the Call: Joe Renews*

Today was a great day! I was recommissioned for a 4th time by the Society of African Missions and will be sent to Ghana, West Africa for two more years. This is where I have been serving for the past six years.

Many ask, Why would you leave family and friends and travel across the world to a land so unfamiliar? All I can say is that it's a calling by the Holy Spirit because I have never been so content and at peace since going to the missions.

When I was discerning this vocation, Fr. Pat Kelly, SMA, gave me some advice and that advice was to **stay open to the Lord.** That was the push that started me on this wonderful journey. I can't thank him enough for those five simple words that literally changed my life.

I invite anyone who may be discerning a missionary vocation to the Priesthood or Lay Associates, to just listen and stay open to God's call and I know you will not regret it.



# Fr. Steven's Message as He Leaves for Tanzania!

After the Commissioning Mass, a meal was held in the S.M.A. Hall for the newly commissioned S.M.A. missionaries, their families and friends and the S.M.A. Community. **Fr. Dongjin Jeon**, better known as **Fr. Steven**, gave a heartfelt talk. He said:

This might get a little long, but please bear with me since this is the last time I will be speaking in front of you. First of all, I would like to thank God for His grace and mercy. I had many worries as a priest in Korea—mostly how to live the life of a true priest. Then I decided to come out of my parish and become a missionary priest. I am still relatively young and inexperienced, compared to most Fathers here at S.M.A. I have learned so much from them and have so much respect. I hope I can be like the SMA Fathers when I am older.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all the Fathers and members of SMA who have taken care of me so well during my stay. Especially, I pray for the health of Fr. Al Cooney and Fr. James McConnell, whose mere presence inspires admiration. I hope to meet them again when I come back to Tenafly to visit. And, to our very charismatic Provincial Superior Fr. Mike Moran, thank you very much for all your care and support.

As I'll be sent to Tanzania, on behalf of the S.M.A. American Province, I will do my best to live up to the expectations.

My utmost gratitude to my fellow priests, as well as everyone gathered here today. I hope you



Above: S.M.A. Commissioning of four Missionaries on December 8th, 2018.



Above: **Fr. Steven (Dongjin) Jeon** receives his mission cross from **Fr. Anbu Kumar, S.M.A.**

Below: The newly Commissioned Missionaries with **Fr. Michael Moran, S.M.A.** Provincial Superior.



Below: **S.M.A. Associate Fr. Francis Kim** and parishioners await the arrival of Fr. Steven, who will join them in Bugisi, Tanzania, later this month.



know how much your prayers and devotion give strength and courage to someone far away. Please remember that and take pride in it.

As you may know, South Korea used to be a very poor country. Throughout the Japanese colonial period and the outbreak of the Korean war, the country was divided and left in ruins.

However, thanks to missionaries (like the S.M.A.) as well as help from abroad, including the United States, South Korea was able to rebuild itself. Now it is one of the most developed countries in Asia along with China and Japan. We owe much.

I owe God for giving me life—also I am indebted to my parents and to the countless people I have met throughout my life and to all of you here today.

If you have received help from others, then you should help others in need. If you are loved by others, then you should love others in return.

I do not know how well I will do, but soon I will be going to Africa **to give back from what I have received—to help and love others.**

So, I ask you to pray for me. I am in desperate need of your prayers because I know I am not good enough. Please remember Fr. Steven from South Korea in your prayers. I will also remember you in mine.

Once again, thank you very much for everything and may the Lord's mercy, grace and love be with you all and with the S.M.A. Family. Thank you!

# God Can Use Us

by Theresa Hicks

One of the S.M.A. charisms that touches my heart is the call to care for the poor, marginalized and most abandoned, wherever we serve. Dec. 8, 2018 marked the 30th Anniversary of my permanent commitment with the Society of African Missions.

**Serving in Liberia** Before I joined S.M.A., I began serving in the missions in 1970 in Pleebo, Liberia alongside the *Sisters of the Child Jesus*, from Canada. My oldest sister, Sylvia, belonged to their order. I had recently graduated as an R.N, and the Sisters wanted a nurse to take care of the patients at the Bonike Leprosy Center. I was ready! Besides working at the General Clinic in Pleebo, I ran the Mobile Clinic to three outstations: Bonike Leprosy Center, Monalu and Karlokeh.

During these early years, I met some down-to-earth, wholehearted S.M.A. missionaries in Liberia. Hospitality was one of S.M.A.'s charisms and every mission house was very welcoming. It was a vibrant experience of God's love.

## **Another Big Step on the Path**

As I felt called to give God my all, on February 4, 1974, Bishop Remi de Roo of the Diocese of Victoria, accepted me to make a private vow of celibacy and I became a member of the Church consecrated in this way. I returned to Liberia.

**The Journey Continues** In 1980, I joined S.M.A. and was assigned to work at the Ganta Leprosy Center in northern Liberia. I learned so much during those years. The main discovery was living with a difficult person and finding out I did not love.

That was a shock! My vocation was to love—to do God's will. I wasn't able to love, even though my only desire was to do what God wanted. Ever after, when the individual's behavior was upsetting to me, I would pray for peace and joy and whatever the person needed. This went on for a few months. Then one day, this individual was simply telling a joke and I felt such a great love for the person. I knew it wasn't me, so I came to recognize the love of God in me. Discovering God's love in me, helped me to see God in every person—to really see Jesus in my brothers and sisters. Also, I realized, that God's love is infinite and unconditional. There is no one we can't love as it is God's love pouring through us.

My next assignment in Liberia was a Primary Health Care Project in West Point, a very crowded poor area of 40,000 people on a 21-acre sandbar. It was a joint Government and Catholic Mission Project. Using the **Training for Transformation** method, (where the people are the ones to identify their problems, solutions and plan of action) the clinic grew and flourished. It was life-giving for so many. Now the trained staff had the medicines and materials needed to serve the multitudes. The clinic, now Star of the Sea Health Center, provided valuable programs and services to the community and those who came from afar. It continues to do so today under the leadership of the medical director, Dr. Diabe Dore.

On December 24, 1989, a civil war began in the north and descended

## **S.M.A.'s Beginnings**

December 8th is the day S.M.A. celebrates its Foundation Day. On December 8, 1856, the Society was founded in Lyon, France by **Msgr. Melchior de Marion Bresillac**. He was a wholehearted missionary, giving it all he had. The beginnings of S.M.A. were challenging and fraught with difficulties. After spending three years in France establishing S.M.A., our Founder traveled to the mission in Freetown, Sierra Leone to join the S.M.A. Team there. Yellow Fever was raging at the time. He came down with Yellow Fever and died on June 25, 1859, after only six weeks in the missions. Three companions also died during this time.

"A mission thus begun, will never perish." Despite the dark and discouraging beginnings, 162 years later, SMA continues to grow and flourish. Praise God!

upon Liberia. Throughout the war, Missionaries and local people did what they could for everyone in this tragic time.

## **Encouraging Mission**

In September 1991, the S.M.A. Provincial asked me to come home and assigned me to be the Director of the S.M.A. Lay Missionary Program, working with the Vocation/Formation Team in Maryland. I spent the next twenty years learning from the Team and encouraging the candidates who came to S.M.A. in their missionary vocation.

I want to encourage everyone who is discerning God's call in their life. When you say "Yes," give God your wholehearted response! Don't look back or count the cost. You might be very surprised, even delighted, in what God can do with your "Yes." The more we decrease, and the life of Jesus increases in our lives, the more God can use us.