



Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Thirty-five years ago, newly ordained a priest for St. Patrick's Missionary Society, it was with a bit of trepidation that I left Ireland to begin my first assignment in Africa. In retrospect, however, God's providence is evident. The people I ministered to in Lagos, Nigeria, and elsewhere in Africa taught me so much. Eager to unite people through their Catholic faith, my efforts centered on building sustainable Christian communities that bridged ethnic and cultural divisions and enhanced human dignity through individual and community development. These goals included initiating the Archdiocese's pilot program for street-based communities (SBCs) to reduce isolation, instill hope and optimism, and demonstrate collaboration's transformative power.

The SBCs provided a framework enabling people to work in partnership to enrich all facets of their lives and community. Our efforts succeeded, so much so that Cardinal Okogie appointed me pastor of the tribally divided parish of St. Michael in Alapere, Ketu, Nigeria. They were profoundly impacted by establishing a network of forty SBCs who met weekly to reflect on the Gospel and develop all aspects necessary to a Christian community. They broke down tribal barriers and significantly improved the quality of life by addressing the larger community's most basic human needs, including a primary health clinic and a childcare center. This tangible impact, a testament to the community's resilience and potential, expanded to include other programs such as peace, justice, and adult literacy, some of which were adopted throughout the Archdiocese of Lagos. With the SBC movement flourishing, I left West Africa to pursue a master's degree in religious education at Loyola University. This gave me valuable insights into effective leadership and community development strategies for diverse cultural contexts.

Returning to Africa in 2002, at the request of St. Patrick's Missionary Society, I began developing a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic by conducting field research throughout Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, Mozambique, Malawi, and Kenya. As a result, I established the Authentic Human Development program in South Africa to spur self-sustaining projects so people could rebuild their lives.

After sixteen years serving in Africa, I returned to the United States to incardinate in the Archdiocese of Chicago; I returned to Queen of All Saints parish, where I had assisted while studying at Loyola. Applying the SBC principles, I began Circles of Friends, small groups of parishioners to celebrate the Eucharist in their homes, discuss the Gospel, and encourage faith

sharing among friends. These groups fostered a more spiritually connected community primed to impact others positively. I also helped form the QAS Men's Club, a service-based ministry and initiated a mentoring group serving refugees. In 2010, Cardinal George appointed me associate pastor of St. Mary's in Buffalo Grove, then in 2012, as pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Libertyville. I was welcomed into communities of dedicated staff and parishioners in both parishes. St. Joseph's parish is thriving today, and people are committed to supporting its ministries, formation, and outreach programs. My life's ministry and work confirm my belief that strong communities don't just happen; they are nurtured, maintained, and adaptable to be more effective in changing circumstances. For example, during the pandemic, the parish offered online and outdoor Masses, established a food pantry, and developed a ministry to provide beds to needy people. Backyard Masses give friends and neighbors an opportunity for more intimate faith sharing and formation, and service opportunities strengthen our parishioners' relationships and enhance our witness to the broader community.

After Cardinal Cupich appointed me pastor of St. Anne's, I was heartened to discover St. Anne's had SBCs centuries ago! The parish's history notes, "The Catholic community in Barrington started when missionary priests celebrated Mass in private homes." The parish has a wonderful reputation, and Fr. Bernie's leadership was instrumental. His sudden death was heartbreaking for his family, colleagues, parishioners, brother priests, and even beyond, those he supported through the Catholic Extension Society. In our view, God called him home too soon. Yet an Irish blessing points out: "How does one measure time? No, not in days, months, or years. It is measured by the most precious of all things...Love. Without which all beings and things, whether brave and beautiful, would perish." Together, let us build on Fr. Bernie's legacy of love in the years ahead. My priority is getting to know you, and I look forward to hearing your stories and insights; feel free to invite me to your home so we can chat over a cup of tea.

Serving God's people on three continents for over three decades has been a great blessing. It has been a privilege getting to know people, listening to their stories, learning from their faith journeys, and sharing Christ's mercy, grace, and peace as I accompanied them in good and challenging times. Each time I gather with people around the Lord's Table, I am reminded that in breaking the bread, Jesus revealed his continued presence in restoring relationships with and among us. God's gift of himself in the Eucharist strengthens our relationship with him, gives our lives ultimate meaning in a world desperate for purpose, connection, and community, and fortifies us to go forth as Christ's ambassadors. For that, I am ever grateful.

In gratitude,

Father John Trout
Pastor, Saint Anne Catholic Community

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