

## Sister Dianne Moore

“Little by little, we arrive”

Through her ministry to the people of Haiti, Sister Dianne Moore has come to know and to cherish many Haitian proverbs. One of these, “piti piti nou rive,” is translated as “little by little, we arrive.” This proverb might be a fitting byline for Sister Dianne’s years of ministry as a Sister of Charity. With humility and a deep desire to listen and learn, Sister Dianne walks in solidarity with people in great need as little by little, she brings light and hope.

Sister Dianne grew up in Chatham, New Jersey. She was named Dianne in honor of her Aunt Anne, a Sister of Charity who died five days

after Dianne was born. Dianne attended St. Patrick’s School and dearly loved the Sisters of Christian Charity who taught there. She remembers telling her 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher that she wanted to be a nurse when she grew up. “And the teacher said, ‘Very good, dear, but do you know that you can be a nurse AND a nun too?’”

The idea that she could be both a nurse and a nun captivated Dianne and persisted when she became more deeply connected with the Sisters of Charity at Bayley Ellard High School. She came to know many of the sisters and was inspired by their commitment, joy and caring service to the students and to one another.

Following graduation from high school in 1964, Dianne entered the Sisters of Charity with the steadfast conviction that she was called to be a nun and maybe even a nurse too. Although most entering the community at that time were steered toward ministries in education, Sister Dianne was soon permitted to pursue her dream. She absolutely loved nursing as she served in All Soul’s Hospital, St. Mary’s in Passaic, St. Anne Villa and Specialized Children’s Hospital in Newark. Beginning in 1971, she was also blessed by living in a close knit community with four other Sisters of Charity, all nurses, whose lasting bonds through mission and ministry continue today.

Life for Sister Dianne took an unexpected turn when she was injured in an automobile accident and needed to take a break from nursing. After a period of recovery, she returned to ministry at Saint Anne Villa. She says, “I loved working with the sisters, developing relationships with them and learning from their wisdom and years of experience. I had actually hoped and dreamed that I would be there forever.”

Staying at the Villa forever was not part of God’s plan for Sister Dianne. In 1980, Sister Dianne found herself at a crossroads. Circumstances changed and ministry at the Villa was no longer an option. Though she was disappointed and uncertain of the future, Sister Dianne was encouraged to take whatever time she needed to look at other options.

The unexpected happened again. Someone (she never knew who) slipped a notice under her door saying that the Medical Mission Sisters were looking for nurses to work with the International Rescue Committee in Thailand. “I was certain that this was some kind of punishment and ‘they’ wanted to be rid of me.” Looking at it more deeply and trying to understand God’s plan, Sister Dianne said ‘yes’ to working with the Cambodian refugees in Thailand. A three month commitment became five, as she lived and worked long days in a MASH tent city, providing critical medical care to women and children. “My eyes were opened to see the overwhelming suffering of so many innocent people as a result of war.” Looking back, Sister Dianne realizes that her experience in Thailand changed her life. “That first step into the unknown became one of my greatest gifts.”



When Sister Dianne was preparing to leave Thailand, a coworker informed her that she could choose any alternate route home. She says, “The only place I wanted to go was to see Mother Teresa, so I decided to stop in Calcutta not even knowing if it was on my way home or not.”

With no plan other than a desire to see Mother Teresa, Sister Dianne flew from Bangkok to Calcutta. She arrived at night and knew no one. “The airport was not like any airport I’d ever seen. There were people everywhere and with no electricity in the city, all was in darkness.” She went with the first person who offered her a ride and became more and more anxious as she sought a place to stay with no success. Her reward for finally securing a hotel room was sharing the bed with some invisible creatures that kept her scratching all night and for months to come.

Unable to sleep and desperate to get out of the room, Sister Dianne set out very early the next day to find Mother Teresa. With a vague sense of where she was headed, she walked through streets that were cluttered with garbage and people sleeping in the gutters. She eventually came to a big brown door with the words, “Missionary of Charity.” “They invited me in for morning Mass. After Mass, there was a line of people waiting to meet Mother. By the time she saw me, I didn’t look well and Mother asked where I was staying. When I told her, she sent sisters with me to get my bag and I stayed with them for a month.”

During that month in Calcutta, Sister Dianne walked and worked side by side with the sisters who ministered with Mother Teresa. “I went with them into the streets, ministered at the home for the dying, the leper colony and the orphanage. I saw Mother Teresa in action serving the poorest of the poor and it was a blessing for me.”

Sister Dianne returned to the United States with a whole new perspective about the world. She says, “Before that, I never really felt challenged. We grew up thinking that everyone was just like us, but found that our world is a lot bigger.” Inspired by Mother Teresa’s teaching that there is a Calcutta at everyone’s doorstep, she moved to rejoin her sisters ministering to rural migrant farm workers on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Under the auspices of Catholic Charities, they opened Seton Center and provided food, clothes, medical care and advocacy to migrant farmworkers and the local community.

As Sister Dianne and the other sisters continued their ministry in rural Maryland, they could not ignore the humanitarian crises that were happening in other parts of the world. One of these was the mass starvation suffered in Somalia. Sister Dianne and Sister Ceil McManus joined with Catholic Relief Services to serve for more than four months in a feeding center for severely malnourished children in Mogadishu. They did what they could among the heartbreak of so many children with limbs like sticks and bloated bellies. Increasing concerns for the safety of aid workers forced them to leave just before more violence erupted with the downing of a US Black Hawk helicopter.

Another part of the world marked by hunger and oppression that was much closer to home was Haiti, which was then and still remains the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. The desperate conditions caused tens of thousands of people to flee by boat and seek refuge in the United States. Many of these Haitians ended up as migrant farm workers in Maryland. Sister Dianne says, “It’s embarrassing to say now, but we knew nothing about Haiti or the Haitian people.” Over time, the sisters came to know the workers as they helped them send aid back to their families in Haiti. They soon made connections with local Haitian pastors. The sisters believed that they could better serve the Haitian people in Maryland if they knew more about what life was like in Haiti and what forced them to leave their country. “The more involved we became, the more we knew we needed to go to Haiti to see for ourselves.”

Sister Dianne says that her first trip to Haiti blew her mind. She recalls, “When you got off the plane, everything was overwhelming – the sights, smells, the sounds, the cries. The air was suffocating and the whole environment felt oppressive.” She and the two Sisters of Charity who traveled with her journeyed across the country by bus and by the little “tap tap” taxis that were so prevalent. They had no agenda other than to talk to people, hear their stories and learn from them. Sister Dianne relates, “I just could not believe that people could be living like that only an hour and a half away from Miami and we knew nothing about them. Nothing. It was far worse than anything you could imagine.”

That first visit to Haiti led to many others. Sister Dianne came to regard Haiti as “the pebble in my shoe” that could never leave her. She says, “Once you see, you can’t not see; once you feel, you can’t not feel.” She was deeply moved by people who were just like us, with the same basic needs but no options or resources. They couldn’t get food; they couldn’t get clothes; they couldn’t travel safely and they had little access to education or health care.

In 2003, Sister Dianne and other sisters affected by the overwhelming suffering in Haiti were urged to present a proposal to the Assembly to establish a Haitian Connection. The proposal was approved unanimously. “That’s when we began moving toward a greater commitment and presence in Haiti.” She explains, “At that time we were not thinking we could go and do anything, for we still had much to learn. It was all about letting go of what we thought we knew in order to make room for a reality far different than our own.”

The Sisters’ mission in Haiti evolved slowly by building upon the Haitian connections that several sisters already had and by working with congregations that had established ministries there. Sister Dianne did not initially stay full time, but made frequent short term trips as she continued to learn. She says, “The problem was, every time you took these trips, you’d have one foot there and then you’d step back into your own reality with little time to process.”

Things changed for Sister Dianne after Haiti was devastated by an earthquake in 2010. Sister Dianne and Sister Ceil McManus traveled to Haiti a month after the earthquake. “It was bad before. You could hardly believe that it was even worse. Everywhere you went, there were crumpled buildings but people knelt and sang and prayed all day long, thanking God for his mercy and love and sure that God was truly in the midst of their troubles.” She adds, “Everyone wants to bring God to Haiti, but I can tell you that God is already there, long before us. In Haiti, many people think that everyone has forgotten them but they say, ‘God never forgets.’”

The overwhelming need created by the earthquake convinced Sister Dianne that it was time to minister in Haiti full time. With Sister Janet Lehmann and in collaboration with Maryknoll Sisters, she took up residence in a rural Haitian village and started a ministry known as *Spirit Alive Haiti*. She says, “We didn’t have the expectation that we could fix Haiti. But we could walk with people, learn from people, share with them and develop a relationship. That doesn’t happen quickly.” Each day brought Sister Dianne the realization that she had more to learn. “We tried all kinds of things that didn’t work because they came from us. We had to respect their ideas and support them in what they initiate.”

If Sister Dianne has learned anything, it is that nothing is easy in Haiti. “Every day is a struggle and surviving the day takes a tremendous act of courage. It’s one little tiny step at a time.” She is heartened by the little sparks of light and the little signs of hope in and among the people she sees every day. “I say ‘one mother at a time, one family at a time, one community at a time.’ We try to build a healthy caring community around every project, a community of women who work together and help each other.”

Sister Dianne has been deeply gratified to have Seton Associate Dawn Colapietro as her partner in ministry for the last six years. Together, they have provided wide ranging medical services and support to women and children and have also fostered the development of new programs that provide hope and opportunity, such as a microloan program and a program that helps families raise goats to meet ongoing needs.

Perhaps the most exciting project for Sister Dianne and Dawn is the construction of a 12-room school by Food for the Poor. This became a reality through the persistent advocacy of the Sisters of Charity. When completed, the school will provide for the education of 250 children in the village of Cuvier. Sister Dianne and Dawn eagerly look forward to celebrating the opening of that school with all the people who came together to make it happen.

Sister Dianne considers it a great privilege to represent the Sisters of Charity in Haiti. “The Sisters of Charity have always been committed to serve those most vulnerable and in need both near and far. It’s a gift to walk with the people for a period of time, to be who we are and where we’re supposed to be.”

She has learned from experience that “it’s not the big stuff, but as Mother Teresa said, whatever you do, do with love.” She also draws comfort from Mother Seton’s counsel to “do the best you can and leave the rest to God.”

The people of Haiti are blessed to have Sister Dianne walk with them as she trusts that God will continue to use her and work through her. She says, “I can’t always claim to be successful but I try to be faithful.” She knows that God will be with her on her continuing journey. “I don’t know what it is, but I do know that God is always doing something new. And I can look forward to that with hope.”

Written by Wendy Relation – Director of Development