

August 4th, 2014 – Sister Ann Vonder Meulen speaking with Professor Mary Ellen Lennon at the Convent of the Sisters of St. Francis in Oldenburg, Indiana.

Abbreviations

SAVM: Sister Ann Vonder Meulen

MEL: Mary Ellen Lennon

MEL: This is Mary Ellen Lennon in Oldenburg, Indiana at the Convent of the Sisters of St. Francis. It is August 4, 2014 and I am very happy to be sharing an interview with Sister Ann Vonder Meulen. Would you like to introduce yourself?

SAVM: Sure, well, as Mary Ellen mentioned, I'm a Sister of St. Francis and I have—I'm presently working with immigrants in this country because I felt that call, I think, after being in Papua New Guinea and working with another culture and realizing the many gifts of working in another culture, actually it was cultures that—that's what I wanted to do when I came back and I had also been, before I went over as a missionary abroad, I worked in some of our inner-city schools as a, um, as one of the diocesan coordinators for special education and religious ed. So I did a fair amount of traveling then, working again with poor rural areas and kind of the foothills of the Appalachians where our diocese stretched into. Did a lot of work in the inner city mostly among African American parishes, so we all had about I guess about 50 parishes I think at that time were assigned to each of us and most of mine were inner-city in poor rural areas as well as a few in suburbs, but I really loved it and I found one of my—there and working with different cultures—I found that I often had to be a representative because I felt that very often those folks in the far-flung areas and in the inner cities were not thought of when programs were planned when arch diocesan efforts were underway and so I felt like I was a voice for them, but also helping them to become a voice for themselves at the same time.

And I guess, it was kind of second nature to me to do that because of the family I was raised in. I came from a family where people of other cultures were welcomed into our home even though we lived in a very white area. My dad worked with black laborers in his work as a plumber and pipe fitter and they would come with their families. We had a Japanese family next door and we thought, you know, I mean they were always part of us and we were all similar in ages really and never thought much of it. But, until my dad died, and one of the Japanese men came back, Wesley, and he said to me, "Ann, I'll never forget, I'll never forget your dad." He made me feel so welcome in your home and I thought, Yeah, yeah, dad usually did that and he said, "No, I mean we were Japanese, we were Japanese." And that was not too long after the war and he said, "Yours was the only home on that street, I was ever in." And that really, I mean, that really touched me. I said, "Oh, Wesley, I had no idea."

Anyway, it still touches me to think what people must have been going through and I think coming out of a home like that, and I mean, my dad when the school was about to be integrated as I was leaving at the grade school and my dad says, "What, what's it going to be like, you know, when you have black students sitting next to you because we were integrating; a black school was closing that our Sisters had, and so they were all coming to Saint Clement and he said, "You know, tell me about what you think that's gonna be like?" And I said, "I think that's gonna be neat because we're gonna learn other people's ways and

we already know, I mean, you've got friends and they've been here and it's not scary for us," but I said, "I know some of the families here aren't happy."

I remember having this discussion over the supper table and he said, "I better *never* ever hear that you treat them in any way, differently, than you would treat some of your friends on the street, which was Hawaii and I said, "Oh no," you know, it was like I felt we had such good training that way at home between my grandfather's influence, you know, as an immigrant and sharing his constant reminders as a child. I can remember that if people would just get to know each other across cultures, you would never, we'd never have the wars and the problems we have. And coming from Croatia, he had experienced that as a child and so that was—I think a lot of that I would say all of that is kind of the seed, really, of probably my little religious vocation, but also my desire to be with people who didn't actually fit the "norm" in terms of what the white, you know, middle class culture was.

So, anyway, early in the community after I'd finished, well I hadn't even finished my undergrad degree because we, that's when we did it on a 10-year plan where you worked and went to school at the same time. So it took a while for us to finish and so after I finished and I'd always—on my papers when they came out for what would you like to do next year for your mission and I'd always put I was interested in Papua New Guinea in the future and then I got into special religious ed. Got my masters in that and I loved what I was doing and I've been in that in the office downtown for eight years, you know, just circulating to all these parishes. It was our Superior, Kate Holohan, calls me in one day and she said she wanted to talk to me, so I came in to Oldenburg and she said, "Anne, we'd like you to go into formation." And it was like "Aw, I really love what I'm doing." But formation isn't forever, like, you know, I could do that for a few years and go back to, you know, being in special education and so I said, "Just let me think about it. Can I call you in a few days after I talked to some of my friends?"

But I wasn't excited about formation. Even though I had helped, I've done a lot of vocation awareness programs over the years working with the diocesan office in Cincinnati, but I wasn't so sure I wanted to leave something I really loved and felt very, very successful at, very loved, I have lots of collaboration, which I don't think I totally appreciated till the end of my time there that, how many people, you know, came to me and said, You have no idea what you did for me, I never thought I could speak about handicapped children. Parents who said that they were very active and very *activist*, you might say, in protecting their children with their laws and very engaged in the community and in parent groups.

So when I left that ministry, again, which was very multicultural, I was really grateful when I look back. I actually headed up a National Convention for the National Apostolate of Mentally Handicapped Persons the year I was leaving. Actually it was the summer right before I left Cincinnati. I think the comment I heard most was, we have never had a conference with *this* many people engaged and you were the first person to really get this ministry started in this diocese and it was well attended, I mean, it was a team that pulled it off, you know, and it was the biggest, it had twice as many people attending as any other conference. It was a big success because everybody did their piece and everybody enjoyed it. We had recreational things. We got mentally handicapped people from the community involved in the conference as speakers. We had a big boat ride for our one night of recreation, so that everybody was together. Many people said that was the best thing

because you had to be dancing, you know, we kept switching dance partners as the music went on and it was just a wonderful time.

It was a wonderful way to leave. I'm still in touch, I mean, people I was on the staff with there, we were really, I'd say, we were a community and it was a mix: there's one priest, actually two, there were lay people. The rest were half lay and half sisters. We vacationed together. I mean it was really—not everybody together, but you know a few of us would vacation. We just really enjoyed each other and supported each other. So that was, I think, good groundwork for going to Papua New Guinea to, to have all those multicultural experiences. And that was a multicultural staff as well, you know, very mixed.

So when Kate asked me that, I said, "Okay, I'll think about it" and I called her and I said, "Yeah, I think I could do this for a few years, but you know, this is my real love and I feel it's a real need in the church," because I said, "In the last eight years that's what I was doing, I was bringing people out of the woodwork to be recognized, to be even allowed in church to be able to move up to the front pew where they could see." I said, "And there's still so much to be done."

But, on the other hand, I could see that many of the people I had trained in the parishes were doing a phenomenal job. They were helping each other and I thought, Maybe this isn't a bad time to take a break. So, when I came to talk with her she said, "Well, um, we want you now to think about formation work again in Papua New Guinea." And I'm like—she said, "You had it on so many—in the past—we looked over our records and you volunteered so many times. I said, "Well, I'm in kind of a different space now" you know, it's like—and it was hard for me to consider because I thought, you know, I'm established here. I don't know the Sisters over there very well because I was active out in the field when they did come home. I might talk to them on occasion in communities, but I really didn't know many of them with the exception of one who had been my principal at one of the parishes and she went over there later in life. Well I was 39, you know, and a lot of people told me I was actually really not to even consider it. In fact, one of our Sisters that had been there said, "Oh Ann, you don't want to do this, you don't want to do this." And I said, well, I mean, "I don't see that it can hurt me. It's gonna be hard to leave my ministry, but there may be a time for me to try this out" and then they—our Sisters have a habit of staying forever okay—many, many years and I said right off, I said, "You know, I don't see myself as a real long-term missionary. I'm glad to go, but I also want to be prepared." So I went to St. Louis for a year. St. Louis University at a multicultural formation program which I took part in, thirteen countries represented there too.

So that was a wonderful, *wonderful* preparation and I found everything I had done thus far was great preparation for where I was going. This was also an opportunity to talk to many sisters from local congregations who had been started by Sisters from the U.S. or Europe and they were all over from Africa, Japan, some of the islands, Tonga. My question was "How do you know how long to stay, how long to stay with a community?" And they said, "You want to leave before they think, they're ready." That was one of the big questions I remember asking each one and I asked, "How do you prepare them?" They said, "Give them the spirit of your congregation and then give them as much responsibility as you can all along," and they all talked, I think, all but one of them talked about actually kicking a

community that was helping them out of the country. I mean they made them so miserable, they had to leave and I thought well—I don't want to go there, so being with them was a wonderful experience, so when I came back and I explained to them where the community was as far as I could tell, you know, we've been with them about 15 years and they said we don't think much longer probably because they were from very—I mean they grew up in grass huts, you know, in Africa, and I think there were a lot of similarities when I got to Papua New Guinea I could see there was a lot from what they had described and I learned a lot in terms of how it was. The classes were great, but from the interaction with the other participants was also a source of a lot of wisdom for me.

And so I went over and my way of teaching, I guess, was also quite different from what had been happening there because my whole background in teaching because I was much younger than most of the sisters there when I went, most of them went as very young Sisters and I'm coming with the Master's, which I'm not sure any of them had, in Theology as well as Special Ed. And I found that rather challenging. I was handed things to teach from, you know, which some of them I found very dated and that sometimes from all I knew about a culture I thought they're not too enculturated. Now this is not to say anything against the Sisters who did things this way, it was just so contrary to how I thought best teaching practice ought to be and they said, "No this is the way they learn here" and so I tried it and it was just like not me. And so I said, "If you don't mind, I'd like you to come and just observe my class and maybe see what I'm doing and if you think it's very alien to where they are, but, what I found—they said, "Well, you don't have to do that"—but what I found was that there was a lot more receptivity when I started with their own human experience, like I was used to teaching anywhere and then brought in the gospel or brought in whenever I was teaching. It also gave *me* a lead into where are they and what are they ready to hear and what might take a little longer time. So that was a kind of a challenge, I think, to be accepted for the way I was doing things.

When I went I was to work with novices or no I think it was working with the vocation director who was Noreen and I was going to go with her, which I did a few times and then she ended up having to leave and so there was a redistribution. I think she left maybe three months after I got there, but she was wonderful because those trips with her, she let me in on a lot of local customs that were just particular to these different areas that she had visited and just a lot of little detail things. I just marveled, I mean, she was one of the ones who was over there for the longest, but she was so aware of pointing out just the finer points of how to do things, what to say and where not to walk and you know, I mean everything. It was just—I had studied the language before I went over, but I realized when I got over there the language was done by an Australian on these tapes and it was nothing like the Highlands pidgin it was quite different so I'm trying to relearn that as I went and gradually pick it up and then I realized probably the best way, so I didn't have a lot of pressure at the beginning, so I would go and sit at the market with the women. I just go from place to place, sit on the ground with the ones who knew pidgin, some of them didn't know pigeon, they were speaking the local language, but I would sit with them and I would ask some, there was some that were a little bit educated, I said, "How do you say, 'How much is it?'" And then they would repeat it and then it got into more conversation.

And that's basically how I picked it up because at that time we weren't supposed to be speaking it with the local Sisters because the focus was on English, to get them able to speak English so they could go on for higher education. When that became possible and

also their correspondence studies, which we did with them, were in English and I found that a challenge, you know, and sometimes I had to admit I did use it, even though they preferred that we wouldn't, and I had them teach me. I said, "This is what you can do for me." And I was always saying that to the women in Kagua, I said, "You are my teachers, you are my teachers." "Yeah, we are your teachers." Well I'll never forget, the first time I'm going to leave and you know I'm just talking with them they said, "You must stay here, you can home, but you must become a citizen of our country. And I said, "You know, I don't, I don't think so." "Oh no," they said. And I remember asking, "Why? I don't have to become a citizen, I can come here and be with you for a while." "No you must become a citizen." I said, "So tell me why?" They said, "Because you talk with your face and because you love our children." And I thought, Oh. And then it dawned on me, I did do a lot with their kids, you know, I mean after Mass on Sunday there were some of them that would come over and want to play and I made kites with them and just little things we did together.

And then I found out they were tremendous artists. I mean little kids. We didn't have much paper and stuff, so I would get out old boxes and crayons and say, Draw me a picture of your village so I can find your house when I climb that hill. And they drew things in three dimensions and it was so different from the children here, you know. It's like draw a line, put your house on it, a couple trees or something. And it was like, well they're drawing trees in perspective and houses in perspective and I'm like "Whoa, this is really something." It was like yeah they see things more globally, you know, they're not boxed in by all our structures that they have. They live in round houses for the most part.

So that was really a blessing to have that time just to get acclimated. I did do a really nice introductory or what do they call it, kind of an introduction to Missiology over there. I had taken a course in Missiology at St. Louis University, but then I went over there; they had like an introduction for a new missionaries that lasted for about three weeks, so I did that with missionaries from all over the country.

I was already in formation then and I worked with the novices and then Sister Sabina who was one of the older FSMs, Franciscan Sisters of Mary, I asked if I could have one of them to work with me in the novitiate, you know, just to live in, because I would live there half-time, I'd sleep over there half the time and half the time in our house, and eat with them usually two or three nights a week and then over to our house at other times. So it's constant and I found that a challenge at first, I was kind of living a dual life in many ways and trying not to take away from their cultural way of doing things or their cultural ways of eating even though sometimes it wasn't the cleanliness I was accustomed to and I suffered with that, but it was like, well, this is just all part of it and so I loved being with them and had some challenging folks at the beginning who one of them we had to ask to leave because she wasn't into the type of religious life—I think she ended up joining, and I'm not sure if she ever stayed, a contemplative community, but she had lots of major problems.

MEL: These were Sisters in Papua New Guinea who were becoming Sisters?

SAVM: Yes, right, yeah. So I looked at them as novices. Actually, when they live together as postulants, what I was told is that we just make sure—you know, because it was different tribes living together—if they can learn to get along that's all we wanted, it's a basic thing that—not all we wanted, but the basic thing is they can live together in one house and get along and learn how to respect each other and then the novitiate, we got into more of the

prayer and scripture and spiritual formation and many other aspects of mission. Their mission and life and understanding their community's history and what they were called to in that country, exploring that with them.

So when I came over there, they were about 15 years old as a community and there were 12 of them and it seemed like we always got up to 12 and then somebody would leave. So, for a long time they were 12 and then when I left I think they're up to about 20. When I went back, I think five years later, they were 35 and they were attracting women who were more educated. Most of them that came initially had finished sixth grade because that was about all any girl would finish because they felt anybody who wasn't going to be out in the world working or holding a job, didn't need any more education, so it was hard to get around that with them. And so we couldn't have the demands because many of these women who were coming from out of the bush had very little access to get in and get the materials and the cost was high.

There was one who was a very bright gal, Rose, who even lied to us. She only had second grade, but she said, "I always knew I wanted to be a sister from the time I remember them coming out to the bush." She lived in deep bush and she said, "I always wanted to do that, but I couldn't get the things I needed." There was no school past I think it was grade three or something in her village, though she went to grade two. She said, "Then I just started picking up every English book I could find and reading." When she came to us, she tested out like she had finished grade six. She's quite a bright cookie. She's now a nurse and heads up the—for the diocese—the AIDS, HIV-AIDS Program. So she's, from all I hear, doing a great job.

So, the other thing I really, really liked about Papua New Guinea, besides working with the Sisters, which I really, really enjoyed, I mean I got to know them, and there were hard times, but mostly to see their love of the Franciscan form of life and their desire to make it theirs in a Papua New Guinea setting was very inspiring to me. I think, I probably, maybe spent more time than most like with the scripture, saying, How does this fit here? Or with this vow of poverty of not amassing things because really most of them had more, living in a permanent house, then their families could ever dream of. And I said, "Now, we do this because we can't spend our whole life redoing the house every year, putting on new roofs. That's why we live in a more permanent"—although they were very, very simple places. "We have to make sure nothing like that separates you from your family." So, I remember the novices I had could really see the point of that. And I said, "Because when, you're gonna be like our Sisters you're probably going to go out to the bush and living in a little bush house like the people do, or moving in with a family for a while, while you're there to do your ministry, so you know this does not set you apart."

That was my big thing you have to stay close to your people and I think they really had that too before I got there because they lived on less than a dollar a day, in their money, which was less than ours, and they worked the gardens. And they could do that year round. So another big piece of their life is they worked in the garden every day, which I picked up cause I loved working in the garden. I've always had a garden, so this was no big thing to work with them and even to have one for our missionary community there. So that was a nice piece. In fact, I think a lot of my adjustment there and in the beginning was easier because I had spent a lot of time in nature.

Our family was one that went out almost every weekend to a park, whether it was snowing or what. We do a hike or we went fishing or whatever and we took in most of the parks probably within a two-hour drive of Cincinnati and Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky. It was something I loved. I was used to camping, I mean we never did anything but camp because we couldn't afford it. So, I was used to camping for a couple weeks in a tent every year and even camping in the backyard and we used to put the tent up in the backyard. So if we missed our camping trips, we just put up the tent in the backyard and pretended like we were gone.

So that part wasn't hard for me compared to some of the Sisters that said, "Isn't this difficult? Isn't this difficult?" I said, "No." I think I was younger I was more able to get around you know physically easier, you know, jumping off, jumping over barrets and things like that which I can't do anymore. The other thing I think was driving a car and they said, "Oh this is the hardest thing of all." Well I had already driven a stick and that's all they had over there were stick shifts and so I drove a stick and it was just a matter of getting used to the roads, which were in and out of major potholes. Most of the roads were not sealed so that was different. And trying to maneuver and up the mountains, on these gravel roads in these vehicles, mostly four-wheel drive. But that was not the challenge for me that it had been for many of them because I had been driving. I don't know if most of them even drove before they went over there in the early days. So in that way, I was prepared and I think the fact I did that course at St. Louis University before I went over there was again extremely helpful. So there were a lot of adjustments, I think, for me that were eased.

Another piece; I'm not good at languages, so I picked up the pidgin mostly at the marketplace so I could really sound like the people. But then when I started to travel around the country and work with different communities, I had that opportunity, they're different ways of speaking pidgin too and some had a little more "clipness," so it was always picking up kind of new pieces. And because I was a spiritual director and trained in retreat work too, I was able to go to different religious communities around the country, so in some ways I probably saw more of the country than many people did, many of our Sisters, because of my training. And there was a real lack of people in spiritual direction over there.

And I only started to do that in my last years where I was kind of working my way out of the novitiate and then we sent Sabina off for training. She came back and was novice director and then I moved on to Mendi because they had elected me to leadership in our community as the coordinator over there. So I moved to Mendi. Then I started working with the temporary professed who were going to be there, that was their first time coming to Mendi. So they had a little house there and I lived with our Sisters then because they were temporary professed and the two of them and I would go back and forth with them to their ministries and help prepare them for ministry. The same kind of way I did the teaching: "What do you think the people there need to know?" And their community went by kind of uh, they called it their mission, but it wasn't exactly that way. It's a better mission now, I think, more well developed. But I think was good at the beginning. It was kind of listen—let's see—listen, reflect, and respond. I think that is how it was. So it was listen, reflect on what that means, if you're teaching things in the Gospel, preparing people to celebrate the Sunday Eucharist. Because we had Mass very seldom, it was mostly Communion Services, especially out in the bush, so there was a lot of preparation of that sort, What is the message, you know, that you think the people hear? And you've got to get that from the

people. Read that and say, How does this fit the people? And then help them to develop their homilies or whatever, so, in their teaching, for the kids and what variety of things.

MEL: I'm interested in this community of young women or Papua New Guinea women that you're teaching and living with and watching them grow. And as you said that must be challenging for them, they're coming for many different reasons.

SAVM: I think it was a challenge for them. One thing they were told was that English was preferred, but most, I think all of them, spoke pidgin and that was the language that pretty much united all the language groups. Not everybody knew it, but usually more well educated, anybody that went to school or had any time around towns would know that or they'd pick it up from people who had been, so they could communicate across language groups. So that was the language most of us learned and some of our Sisters who were there longer knew a lot and were in one spot for a long time and I wasn't. I was in Cabo three years, Mendi, I think it was six years, yeah when I was in leadership. And then when Ruth Ann was elected to leadership then. Then I took her place with the FSMs, The Franciscan Sisters of Mary.

With them, I think, the big thing we always were working on was getting them to connect and get to know better those who are not of their tribe or their language group and for that reason they were asked not to speak their language with the Sisters. If they were ever with their family or with other people who spoke that language, they were permitted to use that, but we said to cut down, break down some of the, would you say, some of the superstitions or unrealistic attitudes or ideas they had of one another. They had to learn how to talk to each other in a common language and so that was one of the ways, I think, we tried to break down, but also to celebrate. So, if when they were celebrating their vows—it was common in the islands for anybody making promises—to put their hand on a stone: hand on the stone and a hand on the Bible. This stone then was like a special thing within the community, kind of a sacred piece, where everybody made their promises. First promises or final vows, yeah, hand on a stone. It was a sign of permanence. In some areas, they said, the stone that was oft went around a river stone(??), and the people would use that for a marriage and that's how they picked this up; it was a sign of permanence in marriage and they would actually make a bilum, like a little string bag, to hang like in the rafters or something high in their house and one of the Sisters told me they were just, if there was difficulty in a relationship and one of them wasn't willing to keep working it out they would just go, remember, you know. That's what they did in my tribe, remember what we promised. When I left, I'm not sure the stone held as honored a place you know just in your homes, I think they used to, I mean they would decorate it, really, but I didn't see it out too much after that. It was kind of kept in a safe place and always used for every ceremony, probably still is today.

I would say that was one of the big challenges, to get them to communicate and to learn to care about each other and when one day I asked, I said, "Really, what difference does it make that this community exists here? What is your real witness?" and they looked at me, I said, "No, really, what is *your* particular community's real witness?" And they said, "It's *all* of us living together, all these different tribes living together and learning to care about each other." That to the people here is a big mystery. That all these different tribes could come together and care about each other and they said, "That's our main witness." I thought, That is right on, and I thought that our Sisters in, especially, in encouraging them not to speak in

their local languages unless they were with somebody else outside the community. I think that it helped foster a sense of community.

Now, I still would notice, though, I'd go into a room, like before a big meeting or gathering, and they're all together and I would say, "Hmm, here's the clump from Tari, here's the clump from the Kagua Region, here are the lalibu's over here, here's Mount Hagen," you know, they'd be sitting with their tribes and I would kind of joke about that, I said, "Ooh, we are still a tribal people." And they'd get up. (laughs) "One tribe," they'd say, "We are one tribe." (laughs). I would tease them about it, I did it in kind of a teasing way.

But there was one Sister, who, she has since left the community and I, I wonder if it just tore her apart, but, Angela, well, she was just a wonderful woman, she came to the community and she was born with a foreshortened arm and had a couple fingers coming out of her elbow area and when she came to visit, the Sisters right away said, "Oh, she can't join us, she can't work in a garden." "Maybe she can, you know, I think you need to give her a chance," I said, "That disability is rather small and if that's the only piece of her disability, if her mind is good, if she can be of service, she can walk, she can talk, she's a bright cookie." I mean you know, but they were really not so sure. I said, "Well we work in the gardens every day." "I can do that," she said. So here it was time to work in the garden that day when she's visiting and she went out there with the rest of them and it was like, she's better than we are. Look at that arm is so strong and she'd have that spade, she just be going to town. And I didn't tell her, I did not tell her that the Sisters were apprehensive of that, but it was like everybody in the garden just kind of stopped and looked at her like, whew.

And so they allowed her to enter and she was, she was the only person from—she spoke Kewa, which some of them did. But she was the only person from her area geographic area, Weliami, which was deep, deep in the bush, probably the one that was the most remote of all the ones that came from the Southern Highlands. So, she was the one that was always uniting, always calling people together, even as a young, even as a novice, you could see that. And I remember I had her for spiritual direction for a while and she would just weep because she said, "I don't know if we're ever gonna be one, you know, it's so hard, some of these folks are so set in their ways." So I said, "What do you think we need to do?" She said, "For one thing, some of these folks have mounds in their garden that are long, some are rounded, some are square. Some of them make mounds by digging, digging down in the ground. We have to have all of that in our garden." I said, "You know, I said you're absolutely right." So then we started talking about that. And this was when she was temporary professed.

So then this big tsunami hit up on the coast of Papua New Guinea and they were begging for people to come up there and I was working with the temporary professor, but I asked our Bishop, I said, "You know, I worked with people with disabilities." That was the problem that many of them were disabled because in the tsunami they were thrown against coral and coral can cause lots of infection and broken bones and stuff. Well, many of them lost arms and legs.

We went up there, I guess it's about a month after the tsunami, and all the people had to be moved out of that area because of—it was actually, their place was around the lagoon and a lot of people lived on this little strip of land between the ocean and this lagoon, so when the tsunami came, they saw the water go out, but there was no way for them to get to

higher land because of their houses being there. And a lot—they had about 4,000 people perish. The bodies were washed up on shore elsewhere. The morning there, even a month after, imagine losing so many of your elders. I mean the elders weren't strong enough to hold on, babies, they said we're just—I mean the wave was so strong, it just took the clothes off of people. People climbed trees and some kids got up on a roof when they saw the wave coming, thinking that'll float. And that was true, many of the children were light enough to float on the roofs as they came off the houses, but people would be trapped underneath and many of the children had memories of that and we couldn't help them. We were hardly staying afloat ourselves and there were just people—the other thing is they had a lot of mangrove trees in that area, which there were a lot of branches and stuff, so many people got impaled on those. When that storm came in, it was just—I can't imagine, I mean, I wasn't there for the storm, but, going back afterwards and just that we were there basically to listen to their stories and also to take a census because people were just kind of scattered and moved wherever they could find land and we went to this particular group of people who were far inland at that time and just find out who was alive, who had perished from their family, and there were families of six, eight children, no parents, and trying to fend for themselves. I mean, people were trying to take care of them, but a lot of the adults were still walking around in a stupor and the kids were, you know, real agitated.

So I remember with Angie and I, we went and we started, we just found boxes, it's like they would airdrop stuff to this community because it was hard to reach. When the rivers flooded, there was no way to get there, and it was mostly poor ground, so they couldn't grow much. We went there and Angie was always very open with her arm, she's walking around with her flap up over her shoulder and I said, "You know, Ange, you know, some of these people are losing limbs, you know, I think you need to take that off and let them see that you're managing." She said, "Not yet," and she said, "I know when the right time is to take it off." And she would go in and talk with these people and of course they, then she had her arm covered the whole time and they'd say they start saying something like, it's impossible I mean I'm not enough, and she'd say, "Yes you are enough, you can do this" and she said, "I can do it," you know, and she'd bring out her arm and I was like gosh, I mean it was quite an experience.

But the two of us became very close at that time and all we had, it was like they had built this little platform that was about maybe six, eight feet by that much and that's where we had, there was no, there was a tarp kind of over the top of it a bit and we bent it in a few places and put a couple pots they gave us underneath to catch good water. Because the water there was not good. I came back with a real rash all over myself, malaria, and everything else. But Ange was so cute, she was so good with the kids and I said, let's just keep them drawing and telling their stories and then we have to keep telling them how brave they were. They survived and you're gonna be okay, they're gonna be people to take care of them and we're gonna get a school built here and all this. Just keep them alive and I said, with some of the ones who are in school, we can start teaching them some things. All we did, we didn't have that much, just the old cardboard boxes. And we used charcoal from the fire and they did their—yeah, so that brought us really close together and after I left, we correspond a lot, and she was elected to leadership, which was a very difficult job because, I think in her heart, she always was striving for this unity and there were still pieces that weren't working. And I know she wanted to be back, she had some training, and her experience there was very helpful for her to see that she had a gift for working with others with disabilities. So she took that, I said it's only temporary, but they re-elected her and I

knew she was dying to get back in that ministry and her heart was so in it. So, that's what she's doing today. She's left the community and married a fella who is also working in that field. I'm not sure if he has a disability, I hadn't heard that, so that was a you know wonderful experience with her. And I still feel close to her, she hasn't corresponded since she's left, but I sent her a couple letters of support.

Like I said before, the thing I liked was that you could do a variety of ministries there. Like there were so many needs that the people were claiming, you know, This is what we need so we started—they did beautiful basketry. I don't know if you've seen any of it here? The bags, many of the Sisters carry bags from, beautiful woven bags the women did and the men did most of the basket weaving. So I started—some of their stuff I helped them get to other places and then I started shipping them over here and we sold them in our gift shops and I always charge a little more than it costs so the money would—I think I had like a two thousand dollar grant in the beginning.

By the time I left, it was up to four thousand and we were able to pay them more and learned all kinds of things about shipping that could reduce costs in the meantime and then while I was there I trained one of the Sisters to handle all the financial—, they said they wanted one, and I said, “When I leave who do you want?” And they said, “One of the Sisters, we like this sister, she's very fair.” So she started taking care of—a couple others learned how to package the things to get there safely and so it was all in their hands by the time I left and they, what they did, there were four different tribes and they could argue all the time and I said, “Well, what we're gonna do is we're gonna mail them according to tribes in areas so that if I get things that won't sell you know if you make them shoddy and they don't sell, the money cannot come back to your group. So that's how we tried to handle keeping things at good quality or for resale, so anyway and they did a quite a good business, but one of the missionary Sisters, I think, threw a wrench in it and she accused Agnes of stealing money, which was devastating to Agnes. She would write to me and I'd say Agnes, I know you wouldn't do this I mean she was a very gifted woman, but very honest I found and I could really trust her, in fact, she was also in charge of the community—you know, oversaw the community finances of the local bursar's and had done, I mean, an impeccable job of that and so—and I knew this Sister was starting to get senile, so I wrote, I said, I think she's not thinking straight anymore and well she just—what she did was just hand all the money out to the different lines and said that's it.

And well they were very angry. It caused a lot of grief for Agnes, but she weathered it, and the Bishop believed her story and he said, I've only heard good things about what you've done in the community, what you did. Ann told me all. How talented you were at handling all that stuff for the basket and bilum makers, so I'd like you to become, work toward being the treasurer of the archdiocese's or the diocese there. So that's what she did and they sent her off to school and she started working in the finance office with Susanna and doing a great job. As far as I know she's still there, although she was also struggling with whether to stay in the community because they've gone through a lot of turmoil in the last couple of years and I think it's not uncommon, you know, it is something that every community goes through after leadership leaves.

I know I had a different style of leadership with them. I pretty much tried to talk everything out, I never lowered the boom, that I can remember. When I ended up taking Ruth Ann's place with them and I said you know, “I'm only gonna be here a short time,” and I did tell

them, I said, "I only planned to stay about ten years," I said, "All the local Sisters I talked to from other countries and tribal areas all said 25 years is the max" and I said, "And all the other communities that started here in Papua New Guinea who come to visit you or have you for class in Port Moresby say they're ready" and I said, "So, I think it's almost time for you to have your own leadership."

So they elected their own leadership and I became adviser. Well, the bishop asked them, "Who do you want for your adviser on request? They're not going to interfere, they are not going to direct you in your choices, you can come to them for information or guidance or ask them to facilitate a meeting, but they are not—" and he told me that, "I don't want you to—" Well that I think it was hardest for the other missionaries because of course they're gonna go overboard, I mean, I just, I knew there'd be some you know, and people were just—you gotta do something, you've got to stop them. I said, "It's their community. Yes they're making mistakes, they're not major, but they are going to affect some of the welfare of their community." Well, they're spending all kind of money. I said, "Mm-hmm, yeah and we knew that was gonna happen." Probably the first ones elected to leadership, and there was only one that was like this, but I mean, she got the money, she bought everybody new blankets, everybody had new this, new that, everybody got a bucket in their room, for what, I don't know. It was like, I'll never forget it, and she had one of her relatives who was up and down with a truck. That truck was loaded and this was like a week after the election. And I thought, here we go, and of course all the missionaries hear about it and they're all jumpin on me. I said, I have no part over this. If they come to me, I can talk to them, you want to report it to the bishop, go ahead, maybe he's gonna talk to them. Well he didn't either. You know, we just, whatever I said, everybody's angry at me. Everybody's jumping on me, you gotta do something. I said, I am on request, that's what many of you do not seem to know. They have to make their mistakes. They are gonna go overboard you know, but why not do it while we're here and we can help them clean up the mess?

So anyway, so a few weeks later they said, "Uh, this course came up at Moresby, and we want to send so and so and so and so." I said, "Do you realize your money is gone?" I said, you spent hundreds and hundreds of dollars. We do not have that kind of money. You cleaned it out. And we can't dip into your savings, that's for in case there's an emergency. Well we need to help build another house someplace." But they're like, "But they need this course, can't you write home or call home and get more money?" And I said, "No, I got plenty of money for—I asked our community for money to take care of all your courses. My friends send me money to take care of your courses. We had enough to send four or five people there for studies this year. We have nothing left. You've finished it." And I said, "No I'm not gonna beg." And I told them, I said, "There are some elderly people who give up meals at home in order to donate." I said, "They're poor themselves, but they want to contribute to your education. Some of them send ten dollars a month and that's a huge chunk of money for them." And I said, "I'm gonna go back after you wasted all that money and ask for people to support more?" I said, "I can't do that in my conscience, I cannot do that." And they were like, "Oh."

And that, that kind of really resolved a lot of the problem then, and I mean some of the younger ones got angry at the leadership team for doing what they did, you know, and everybody had new blankets and clothes and I mean you name it they bought it. Shoes and—it's the things they really didn't need and, um, you know so I just—so it was a hard thing there. That was, that was when I was adviser on request. I was superior for about a

year and then I was your adviser on request and so I still, when I was superior I had some of them working on the team with me, but it was different because I was still the white one there. You know, a missionary who they thought had deep pockets, which I didn't, and that was a learning experience and I never had to deal with that the rest of my time there.

MEL: They learned?

SAVM: Yeah, they lived through it. They knew they had to sacrifice and they couldn't send some of their sisters off to study that year, which was really hard for me to do, but I knew I could not, but, if they did it once and got by with it and I just kept feeding the money from God knows where, you know, it was going to continue, but as far as I know it didn't. I don't know what went on after I left. So, I would just say my style there with them raised a lot of hair on people's backs, backs of people's necks, and a lot of people were angry with me and that was extremely hard for me to take because you know missionaries around you are alienated by the choices you've made to hopefully strengthen them and I would say a lot of the missionaries did have this handout mentality, much, I would say some of the older ones did and I think they were tired it was—well, give them this, so they do this. You know, I probably had more energy and I wasn't about to feed—I could see—and I said to them, they said, “Sister Ann, why do you do this?” I said, “Cause I see what it's done in my own country, but people who beg, beg, beg and often, you know, they don't have what they need and it's not because they haven't had the resources given to them or job opportunities offered. It's that they wasted it.” And I said, “I would feel I was doing you a great disservice,” you know, and I said that to the missionaries that came at me.

But that was one of the things, I think of that and after the bad bout with malaria and Aitape where the tsunami was, I knew I probably couldn't, my system was just getting more and more depleted from the malaria and because it takes a long time to build your body up after that. It attacks your liver and so anyway, I knew it was time to go, but I felt good about—I mean I started sewing classes over there and they were sewing for themselves and their kids and that's why I liked a variety of ministries when you saw a need or they identify, the people identified a need or something, they wanted to learn many of the things I was able to do with them of sewing, the artwork, we would get clay and make things out of clay. That was just kind of for fun, in our area it wasn't for firing and stuff, it was giving them a sense of what they could do.

There was a big problem with addictions too and drinking had become pretty rampant and marijuana, they had a high grade of marijuana that grew in the Highlands where we were and they say you can't get that addicted to it, but, we had people who really ruined their minds. A lot of young people and a lot of men that drank, it was like, and because they had no refrigeration they said, “Well, you've got a case and you got to drink it.” And you know, you would call your friends in and they would, they'd buy a case of beer and most of the places where we were because we were in the valleys mostly. They put it into a stream get it cold after a little bit, and mountain stream, and drink away.

And so that was becoming a major problem and it was actually one of the men who returned from the Army, he had a family and they had traveled pretty much while he was in the Army, had a rather high position. So he was sitting better financially. He had a pension from his time in the Army and he came to me one day, he said, “Sister we gotta do something about this” and I said, “Well.” And I had attended some courses over here with

our community when we were addressing the alcoholism among some of our Sisters and in our families. So that would have been back in the 70's or early 80's. And so I had some sense there, but I had to do a lot of exploring with them, why people drank. It wasn't to relax, it was to have fun, to get yourself—it was basically, we drink to get drunk and you know, do things we don't know we're doing. And you know, have people laugh and we laugh at each other. So it wasn't for them, the same reasons that people here drink. It was almost all social, but some, I guess because it hadn't, probably because it hadn't been in the culture or the system, made it worse.

So, I got together with him and a few other guys and we started to put together an addictions course. And I taught them about what addictions do. What does alcohol do to your system, how it affects your brain, your body, your liver. And I said, at that point, there were no liver transplants. So, I was like, I said, "You ruin your liver, you know, and you're finished. What about your family and they liked the idea, they called the beer bottles, their "Little Mary's." "The Mary" as a woman, was like their little wife, and that's, that was how we did it. It was like your beer becomes your wife. It becomes your relationship and the people understood that, so I mean, if somebody over here, and I don't think I brought one home, but if someone were to look at that they would think what? But they drank for all different reasons, they call things by different names, but they got down the fact that it was harmful to your body, harmful to your mind, harmful to your family, and harmful, you know, in just many ways in society that it caused lots of problems.

So we put together a course with a grant from Australia, I think it was, and had them printed up and they were used all over the country within a few months of having it. You know, that was nice because Maureen was at the center. It was a kind of a catechetical center in pastoral ministry center for the Highlands especially. They also had the shop where all the religious books were developed in the country. That particular fit the people, you could buy them there. And so I was able to get them printed up there and then people began to circulate them and after about a year of this, and I was travelling around our dioceses, and a couple other dioceses: Anga and Western Highland, no Western, yeah Western Highlands Province, so, we would go to parishes or pastoral centers and do this course here. John and I mostly. And sometimes another man or two and they would dramatize things to them. They did a lot with drama and it was, it was, just fascinating to watch them and it was really, I mean they went beyond what we had developed, you know, discovered ways of teaching and they really picked up [that] each place is a little different. We got to ask them: Why are people drinking here? What, where do they get their beer? Do you think there should be another brewery in the Highlands?

Just really, things like that to get people to think more critically about the problem and wanting to address it. I did that for a number of years, I guess it was after I got out of, no I wasn't out of, I was still a novice director, but because it was a growing problem there and people would be drunk on the road and try to hold you up and then, you know, you never knew what they were gonna do. So, that got the Sisters interested. So some of them got involved in it and part of the acting, as we took that around, but mostly it was a men's thing and I think that was really good for me to do that because that gave me acceptance by the men and I even said it was very uncommon for a woman to drive anyplace with men who were not, I mean women didn't drive for one thing, but to go off with a man or men was not really acceptable. And so, I went to all their wives and I said, "I know this is not Papua New Guinea fashion, we'd say, but your husband is doing a good job and I want other people to

be able to hear him. May I take him, you know, for a week and we're gonna go to Enga or whatever, they'd asked us to come?" "Take him, take him. We're just glad." You know, that's what they'd all say, like "We're so *glad* that our men are doing something about this problem." Usually they just sit there and play games all day. Which is true. They chop down the trees for the garden and then the women do the rest of the work from there on in. So, the women were just really grateful to get them out and about and doing this stuff. So that was very rewarding.

And then I also traveled several times usually to Moresby, every year, Port Moresby was the capital city, and I would go down there to offer leadership. I coordinated a few leadership courses down there, which would last about two months and—

MEL: For Sisters, for Sister formation?

SAVM: Yeah, well yes sisters, brothers, and priests. And there were people who had been, like the leadership was, people who had been out in the field and active for quite a while in their religious communities. And I did another one which was kind of a renewal course. I didn't do the whole thing but I would go down and do certain like a renewal of the vows, maybe—I picked up, I hadn't had a number of counseling courses. I wasn't a trained counselor, you might say, but I had been trained in counseling for my other work, with parents, so I used a lot of those skills. I simplified, broke it down into ten basic skills and that was another thing I would go around the Highlands particularly and beyond that. I went up to the coast a couple times and down to Port Moresby. I did for seminarians and I did it for, we did it for couples who wanted to learn to talk better to each other. We also did it in areas where there were tribal fights because they said that's it, we don't talk to each other.

People did say the work that the Sisters did with that when we went around and I'd let them do most of the work, was, that it did actually deter some tribal fights because people began to think about what do we have to lose, if we start this up again. If we can't resolve it in another way, if we can't maybe give food to this tribe it's settled or whatever. They began to explore other ways and it was a big—at least a beginning with some of the tribal warfare and uh I'm sure there were other things that were done, but people really liked this course and they had a habit in the culture and when you respected someone for what they said, they would repeat the whole thing. They said, "Oh, you said such as such." And they would repeat the whole story almost word for word and I'm thinking, Oh, we're never gonna get through a meeting or whatever, but I said, "Think of yourself, now," I said, "That's fine and that's your culture and yeah, but if you're trying to really help somebody, and their need is more immediate, like you got it do something more quickly, you have to pick up on the most important things that they say. Not every word."

So I mean things like that started to make sense. Meetings, after, if I did this with some of the guys that we met monthly to practice our skills with addiction counseling, and I had a group from Australia come in and do that, there were representatives from 13 dioceses in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands. That was a miracle—that that ever came off, too—it's just like money just came in and almost without, in fact, one priest sent me like, I needed like another \$17,000. I thought, Where am I gonna get this money? It was getting to be the last minute, and I said, "I tried to raise this, but I think you're not gonna be able to bring some of those people." "You'll find it somewhere, don't worry, we'll bring them all, and cover the cost." And the day the course is gonna start, I get this check in the mail for \$17,000. I'll

never forget it! From a friend of mine, I'd worked in the parish with him and he was a doing more parish missions and I knew that, we had corresponded and he was "Wow wonderful" and then he said, "Ann, I ah—" or he had contacted me before that, and said, "I would like at my next mission, I'll take what I need for just to cover my travel costs, I don't need the money they give at the end, so what I want to say is, I want to tell them that it's going for something specific." And I said—that was my dream to have a course for our diocese and he said, "Well, what would that cost?" I said, "Probably about three thousand dollars to bring everybody together and bring an expert in and I had a priest who had been there who was now, he was in addictions counselor, had worked in the Australian Army as that, but had been a missionary years before that in Papua New Guinea. It was I was so wonderful the way it worked so he had a sense of what it was coming into and what would work and the people he brought were well-prepared.

But yeah there it was, he said, okay the next mission I do, which is in a few weeks, I will send you whatever I get over and above my transportation. This was not a wealthy parish, seventeen thousand dollars, I was like, when I got that check, I was like, "Oh my gosh! How can this?" It was like and that's how things often happen for me you know, it's like I want to do this, I'm not gonna buy sewing machines you know just too expensive, I need money for cloth and this check that came out of nowhere of people, like this Father Jim Meade, I didn't know him from Adam. He was in Cincinnati. He said, "I heard about the kind of work you're doing over there, I think it's exciting and our mission, our mission group, had more than they needed, so I thought, let's send, \$500 to her, I heard she's doing a great job over there and she's going to use this." You know, so I had money for material. And also I get another right before I was going to up to Aitape, I got, he sends another thousand dollars. And I was like "Gee, I don't even know this man." And so I wrote to him and I said, this was extremely generous, but people in the north need it far more than we do and we're gonna be going up there and this would help to cover our costs of travel because there was no way to get there by road, you had to fly, this will pay our flight, and then we'll have plenty to give to them to rebuild. And so what did he do? He sends me another thousand. They probably need more, more than we do here, so it's like, this kind of stuff, happened to me all the time.

I wrote a lot of grants. I taught a lot of the local people who headed up offices in the diocese, that was gradually, they were replacing us. And heading up the, and so, they said, how do you get this money? I said, you write grants, you know, that's what you're gonna have to do. And there are plenty of people who want to give you money, but it takes time to write the grants. And all those folks, more educated they would have had, high school and a little beyond.

MEL: I'm interested in how you were teaching people, or even you describing, I think his name was Jim or the men that would do these programs with you, you were teaching them how to do these programs. I'm curious about these people who came to you and wanted to work with you? Just like the young nuns who wanted to become Sisters, but these men who wanted to be involved, going to different places to talk about alcoholism. Could you talk about them?

SAVM: Oh, I think the Sisters probably brought it up first and so I taught them a little bit and they would share that. And of course, they wanted to know, where did you get this? Is it true? I said, "Yeah, Sister Ann's been teaching about these. Because it's a problem in the villages and we just wanted to know you're hurting yourself, you're hurting your family and

there are more ways, we have like lots of traditional ways to have fun. We don't need to get drunk or high on you know marijuana." And so that's how they knew that I was kind of into that, interested in helping. So then they came and asked me to help them and help them learn more, so I, and some of them, like John, John was the one who I worked with initially and he read English well and I had brought some books when the Sister said this. I had left some books at home and I think I asked somebody to mail them to me, so some of them had pictures in them but not much. But then I, since I'm an artist, I was able to do all these posters to go along with the program like so they had this flip chart that they could use. With people that look like them on it, so that was a blessing.

So that's what really, I think more than ever over there struck me of all the different ministries in ways I had, things I had done in the States, were just perfect for out there. I mean, kids weren't in school because they had a bad arm or a bad leg, I said, that's no reason they shouldn't be in school. You got to get them there and kids start—I'll never forget, this little kid, people didn't see him, they kept them hidden because they were kind of ashamed of the child, and this kid had—it was, I don't know if it was cerebral palsy, but he was paralyzed from the waist down, so he just kind of dragged his legs behind him and so but, actually, I did get a doctor to look at him, and if the parents would have done the therapy, he would have eventually probably been able to walk, but they, you know, it was extensive and they couldn't take the Sisters tried for a while, but then they got moved from place to place and that's hard to see. But the kids would carry him to school. They used to make like something like a woven hammock and they had a little one they put him and then carry him to school after you know we got him out of the bush. We said he should not be here, he should be in school. He was very smart. He said, "No I'm stupid, stupid." And I said, "No he isn't." I told the Sister you have to prove to her that he is smart, so here's our plan. His name is, I said here's his name, and we're gonna give him paper and I want you to practice with him, his hands were a little bit disabled too. So we did like I did here in the States if I didn't, couldn't find an adapted pen or pencil, you'd just take a paper napkin or you know cloth napkin wrap it around and make it bigger, so they can hold it. And he started writing like, I mean, beautiful writing, printing, right away and writing no problem. And I said, what's his mom's—you know we got his mom's name and did the same thing, and we used the pidgin, you know he wrote in pidgin: "Me liken you mama." Or, "I want to go to school" in pidgin. The mother did read some pidgin and she was like, "My son he can't do this, he can't." And we said, yes he can and we did it right in front of her and she just cried and cried and said, "I didn't think he ever could." But they had this idea many times, that if the child was physically disabled that they were gonna be also mentally disabled.

I think in many ways my [decision to] come back, I mean that decision was mostly because I was physically getting sick more often because of the malaria, but I also realized because I had worked with those Sisters for 12 years that for me to continue there working with them closely, I feared that they would not really stand on their own two feet as well as they could, if I wasn't there, and so that was another reason for me deciding it was time. And also, I again, I never thought of myself as long-term. I loved them dearly. I found it a deeply satisfying place to minister for the 12 years, but it was like, I just sensed my time here is up. And I was tired. Formation work is rather intense work because you're dealing with people that personally and I knew the violence that was coming like I was in Kagua. I left actually from Mendi because I had to move from there because we moved out for a while. It was just too dangerous to have the sisters there. But toward the end of that time there, I found myself when the gunshots start going I rolled up in a ball and went out in the hallway on the

floor and I was like, I don't know if I passed out or was just was so exhausted. I went to sleep there and I woke up and I thought, This is going too far. I can't I just can't continue to stay here and be the kind of presence these folks need. I really need, you know, time out and I think it's gonna be. I sensed it was the end, that it was a good time for me to leave. Not that I couldn't have been about more, not that, but I just, I think emotionally and in dealing with—it wasn't just dealing, you know, with myself, that for quite a while, I was the only missionary sister there with those sisters and so a lot of that burden you know, I think I felt more feeling very protective we had sirens on houses and people would come if they were broken into and trying to help, but police force was non-existent when they were needed.

So that was another piece and I realized too when I got back, I was fine initially and then I started to deal with post-traumatic stress. So then I went for help. I went for a program to get through it and I had no idea it was as advanced as it was you know, but I was with, it was really a program where there are lots of other missionaries who are suffering from the same experiences and realized they had to get out and I realized there was much I wanted to do and I miss the community very much. I was as I mentioned quite a bit younger than most of the sisters there and I was raised in a whole other milieu in terms of the community. Many of them went before Vatican II or soon after and I was raised in real post-Vatican II era and just have lots of different ways of teaching, of understanding.

I was an avid reader of you know theology and that was something that I didn't find over there except with the exceptions of two sisters, the oldest ones there, actually Mary Katherine and Charlene, who is now gone. But they were the ones that were readers and they went there later in life too and they kept up, but I couldn't get to them. One was way up on the coast and the other one was in the bush, deeper in the bush on the other side of the diocese. But when I was with them, I always, you know, I sense these kindred spirits like I just I guess it was too, they were—it was stimulating our conversations and we could have heart to hearts because they had gone through some of the same things coming later and feeling like they talked about not feeling respected for what they brought or being treated as though they were kids. And I never, I don't think I felt that's so much, being treated as though I didn't know and part of it, I mean they knew I was coming out of a highly organized setting and a diocesan office and that I had had a lot of experience. So I didn't feel talked down to at all like they expressed.

But I felt it was hard to, to break in or to have conversations that were life giving to me. Things I thought were really important to be discussing and how we were doing our mission. So that was a real loss. Barb Leonhard, a classmate of mine, came over there for a short time but she became ill. She was only there a few months and she had to leave. That was a grace to have her there because—and I had to hand it to the sisters because they knew my adjustment to life with them was very difficult when I first came. They seemed to have a much more rigid way of going about community. Everybody together at the same time doing everything together and I'd never lived like that. I lived in small communities where close, I think close communities and healthy communities, but not that we had to be together all the time doing the same thing all the time watching the same movie. It was like, it was overpowering for me and it was something I never quite got used to and missed terribly when I couldn't get—

And there were, there were a couple priests, actually our Bishop, when he was a priest, I kind of got to know him by running around to the different parishes. He was another one who really kept up on things and did—you know he have those stimulating conversations about the church and where's the next steps, you know, do you think the church here has to go in and there was another Catholic Bishop?, Pete, who I also connected with more. They were generally guys who kept up with things. When they were home on leave they went for courses or you know continued to read. I just always had found that I guess because in the positions I had, I had to read to keep up to often be the teacher of it to others who were in the parishes, so I would say that was one of those challenging things for me for sure.

And coming back then, I think it was getting—and they said it's just, you know, the PTSD is basically, you're so used to dealing with the adrenaline and these holdups on the road and in homes and the adrenaline just keeps shooting and when you get home and part of it is you need the adrenaline to adjust. The major speed differences and everything, you come back, and all of a sudden you're adjusting, but the adrenaline is still pumping. And it does make you kind of crazy. And I was so grateful, you know, to learn about that. I mean, I did end up in the hospital here.

I was just cleaning the kitchen and I ended up in the hospital here. I thought I was getting, I mean my, my chest was so sore and I thought I was gonna vomit and I quickly called over here to the infirmary and I said, "I am having terrible pains in my chest and I feel sick to my stomach and I'm sweating" and she says, "Ann, that sounds like a heart attack." So she came right over and got me over to the hospital and they checked me all out and they said, "No, we don't think it's her heart." And that was the beginning of realizing that, that's what it was. It was this adrenaline continuing to build up, but I didn't need it anymore. And so I think of all these guys coming back from war dealing with this today, you know, it certainly has made me more sensitive to the plight, in fact, I had at one point I thought of maybe moving in that direction and might still do some of that for spiritual direction in the future, if I don't have the energy to continue you know with the women and the kids.

So, I guess I see a lot of possibilities for ministry in the future yet. And again, lots of things I learned there that has, I know, has really helped me in my ministry with Guatemalan immigrants here in the States. And it just takes a lot of listening, what do they need and respond to those needs first before I say, come and learn English. I say, come and teach me Spanish so I can help teach you what you want to learn (laughs). And they'd just laugh. I mean that's what we did, I just had words, you know, all their Spanish words and I put the English for it, you know, on the board, so we had this whole, all these sewing terms and anything I wanted to ask them to do. Everything was on the board in this classroom and they loved it! They said, now you teach us English. I said well, you've already learned, you know, you've got all these English words now, I've got all these Spanish words, so we're gonna help each other.

And I think, um, that's the way I believe you go into everything. You're not one up, no not at all, it's you're just learning on different levels, different things. And I think if you can keep it that way you build trust with people you serve and in good relationships and that's how I, yeah, I know that's still part of who I am today and a real blessing. So I think, that's, I mean that's those are the key things I think to share.

MEL: Thank you. Thank you very much.

SAVM: Thank you for your attentive listening too.

Part II

August 15th, 2014 – Sister Ann Vonder Meulen speaking with Professor Mary Ellen Lennon at the home of Sister Ann Vonder Meulen in Cincinnati, Ohio.

MEL: This is Mary Ellen Lennon on August 15th, 2014, the Feast of the Assumption, and I'm very happy to be in Cincinnati, Ohio at the home of Sister Ann Vonder Meulen. I'm happy to share a conversation with her today. Would you like to introduce yourself again?

SAVM: Yes, I am Sister Ann and I'm presently working here in Cincinnati with Guatemalan children in school and with their mothers teaching sewing and English to them and I think Papua New Guinea kind of got me here. I've always been interested in working multiculturally, but when I came back from Papua New Guinea and my experiences there I thought, I have to look for a place of people in which I can be ministering, you know, because I think it was so rewarding and in it's—just to be part of that and I know my life has been enriched over and over again from the time I was little from being with people of various cultures in our own country, as well as, abroad later and I think one of the things I like to say a little bit about is the scriptures and working with the Sisters, the local Sisters there, the Franciscan Sisters of Mary.

They often had a different way of looking at the scriptures. I can remember one time we were talking about scripture passages that pointed to how do we live poverty, the vow of poverty, or as I put it with them too, to live simply. I love that one. It's from the Founders of the Sisters of Charity. It says, "Live simply that others may simply live." And I remember using that with them. As they did these readings they started talking about what is wealth in their particular place in the mountains of Papua New Guinea and it was pigs. And it's true that very often, I mean, the man in the area where I first worked would wear these necklaces and they would have like bars on him for every pig they owned. And some of course would stretch to their waist you know just these horizontal bars and, and that was to show their wealth. That they were a wealthy man who had something to say in the group. Often the head men especially. They said would wear those and even though they didn't wear them as a community, they had two pigs. And maybe this wasn't the way to go because some people didn't have any pigs, or to some families, two pigs would have been a lot.

And so, the novices I was working with began to question, should they even have pigs in our culture because that is really the sign of wealth? So they decided, they'd start talking about it and they said, well a sheep would be like a poor person's fare. That's what people would buy at the market. They would buy sheep chops or whatever they call lamb chops or in the stores you would see a lot of lamb and maybe that would be better. And they talked about how many that they might have before they would be considered wealthy in the eyes of people. Of course when they presented this to their community, I mean, pigs are like *the* meat of, particularly the Highlands. And they are often the main fare when they have these times of reconciliation they make these big what they call mumus, it's a cooking of

food underground as a celebration. And we have a pig to share, especially the fat of the pig is considered, you know, like a delicacy.

So all of that entered into this dialogue and when they got it to their, brought it to their community that they were questioning this, you know, the older Sisters in the community were like "*What?*" You know, "Are you kidding? This is our culture." And they said, but, you know—Jesus did a lot of things that were against his culture because it just wasn't about being one with everybody. And it was amazing because I remember that time and I was amazed they remembered so many things that he did that were countercultural in his culture. And they started talking about this and you could see that the eyes start to open. Well in the end, after months of dialogue about this, they decided to have a big feast. Eat the pigs, share it with the people around to build, actually it was a kind of building relationships kind of experience to make sure their relationships were strong and then they invested in a few sheep, which became a herd later on. But I thought that was a wonderful process because even though they're living on a dollar a day, we would never consider them wealthy and in our eyes, pigs? Two pigs? With what they've got? I mean it's like that wouldn't say a whole lot about well to us, but they realized that to the people that could be interpreted as wealth, especially if they started to multiply those pigs and that might make their ministry less effective, if they were seen as the rich Sisters.

There were a lot of pieces like that where you tried to help them come to an awareness, reflecting on the gospel. One of the stories they really hated, I remember when we were talking about it was when Jesus cured a man of an evil spirit and he sent the evil spirits, which they called Legion, into this herd of swine and of course I didn't know what swine were at first and I said, "Oh those are pigs." And then they all went into the water and drowned, I don't think so. You know, it's like, "Oh, we can't use that in our culture." So it was really unwrapping a lot of what was in their, in the culture of Jesus' time and how that might reflect because the reason pigs are looked down upon is because they were kind of a taboo for Jewish people and I said, "The only reason they were, initially, was because people got sick a lot when they ate it and it was only because they weren't cooking it properly." It wasn't cooked as it should have been, so people got sick, but you know and I said, that still happens and here doesn't it. People eat too much pig or eat too much fat and people would die from what was called pig bowl. They'd get very terribly sick and it was really, it was too much probably, too much grease and there was a lot of heart issues among people that ate a lot of fat that was just, and I think that probably, you know, when they had the opportunity for it, they didn't have meat all the time in their culture. A lot of the foods they had like I know they grew peanuts, which is a source of protein. The sweet potato which was a staple in their diet is also a source of protein. So they got their protein in different ways and probably had a more balanced diet than many of us here.

The other thing I remember really catching their attention was during a retreat one time that Barb and I were giving together, when she was there. And it was a few passages, but this one particularly from Saint John's Gospel, I think, it was a gospel or one of his epistles. No, it was the gospel where, it's something like: "We are all one in Christ" or "We are called to be one, as Jesus said, as the Father and I are one," that's how close we are. And that started to get them thinking about some of the tribalism; if that's how close Jesus wants us to be, as he is with God, his Father. Wow, we've got some ways to go and I said well we all do, you know, it was, I said, "You're not the only one, only ones to have trouble with this. I

said, "It's everybody, but that's what Jesus wants us to work toward, isn't it?" And they said, "Oh yeah, so many of these readings."

And then another time during their retreat, it was, one of them in our reflecting she says, "It's like I finally got this!" It was one of those from St. Paul's, I think it's to the Corinthians, one of his letters where he says, "We are many parts, but we are all one body." She said, "That just hit me! We are all, all of us here are all one body." And, I think it kind of goes, I think I share it in the last session that they saw that is their key to their mission was to show that women from very, very different tribes often tribes that were at odds with each other could live together in peace and they felt *that* would be their *key* mission. Their key witness in their country. To show that you didn't have to all be of the same bloodline to be related and to care about each other, so those are just some of the pieces of scripture that I always, I was often surprised how they discerned what it meant for their lives. Surprised and happy that they really took it to heart.

That was a blessing because they're digesting it, you might say, in a whole nother way and trying to *live* out of that made me question. I became so much more aware of how much stuff I had or thought I needed, you know, particularly my books and I remember kind of consciously saying, "I'm gonna set these books aside." I was an avid reader and as a teacher and coordinator for religion ed in this diocese before I went over there, I was doing a lot of reading and I think I got into that habit. It was one of the things I missed going over there, was not being near a bookstore and being able to pick up books that I really heard were good or people would write me about them and thinking oh my gosh, what I wouldn't do it for a copy of that. But there were a couple of our retired sisters who knew I was a reader and they would often send me a book now and then that they knew I would like which was such a blessing and, and if I did get our sisters over on it was a Book of the Month Club that had a lot of the current things coming out in spirituality and theology, so that was important, but I thought, I have to not be reading so much because I feel like I might be missing a really important part, you know, maybe I'm not listening attentively enough sometimes I don't want to be just there imparting my great knowledge, if you want to call it that, but I want to hear their experience and only in that way am I going to be able to use what I know to see how it meshes with where they are and what's meaningful at this time in their lives.

So that was a wonderful kind of awakening for me and it's not just something that I did there or to try to develop there, but it's something I continue to develop and I think it's why I realized in listening to the women here when they gathered that what they wanted was to sew and they said, Sister look at our bodies. We are just not built like the white people around here and we need help. We get our stuff a lot of it from the shops or from the second-hand stores but we can't—we have to know how to alter it, so we look and feel okay in our clothes and I thought, Whoa, this has a lot to do with self-esteem for them and raising their confidence being in this new culture, which is so different and that's what they want to learn, so I, so I suggested it and they said well that's not really what we're doing here. And I said, I'll do it, you know, at the center. I'm using this as an example of how things you learn over in Papua New Guinea. Things I learned, really had so much of an impact on how I continued to do ministry here and so we started the sewing class and after we filled the board with words in Spanish and English. It was fun because I was trying with my broken English and Spanish together, I would try to at least pick up one of the phrases and words

we developed for sewing and throw that in there. And then they started saying, they'd be speaking in Spanish, and then they'd say, "needle" or they'd throw in the English word and it got to be lots of fun and I thought, Gee, it's a great way to learn English and so I have a little bit of convincing to do to the staff there that we can do both, and at the same time they're big in to—and I believe in this, doing post-test, pretest all this but, and then setting up my sewing class, okay, if you're doing this in part—write everything you did in part one and then what are you gonna do in part two? That's really nice and I can put that on paper, but, you've got some people who catch on faster. This is similar in Papua New Guinea, in any place, you work really, and it's St. Clement too with a variety kids I work with. Some are gonna catch on faster and some that it will take more time and you know who don't like to listen well, they like to make their mistakes and learn from their mistakes. They're not gonna accomplish all this in this set amount of time.

So, I think what I've learned to a lot of my cross-cultural experience is just kind of go with the flow better. There's more joy in doing that, there's more of a sense of accomplishment in those you're trying to teach as you learn from them. It's always a mutual exchange for me and I think that's part of where you draw satisfaction is people and I think it's same with kids. If you can't have fun teaching them, if you can't make it really palatable for kids, particularly for kids, most of the kids I teach who struggle, you know, with English who struggle with other subjects like, you know, the whole—I think we in the States, our kids today have a much more global perspective than I ever had growing up because of the news we're exposed to, the Internet, and that's what I find; many of the kids coming today from Central America don't have that and they don't have that sense you know growing up in a very isolated place. Like in Papua New Guinea it was the same way there was very little sense even though you were we were teaching the Sisters, it would be like junior high or high school level, their sense of the world was very small and that kind of shocked me at first you know but then I thought they don't have near—they don't have the Internet when I went. I know they do now, but they didn't have that. They don't sit around a TV. They have a radio, which is off-again, on-again, depending on what station they can get and listen to. There's Voice of America, the BBC. But very little that they could get throughout the Highlands with their local news even, so that sense, and that's true for some of the ones coming from Central America.

But, in no time at all, they are probably some of the best in terms of knowing what's going on in the world and when I say what should we pray for today?, their awareness is way beyond sometimes where the kids who are born here in the States, American citizens are. So and I found that in Papua New Guinea too that they were very eager to know about the rest of the world. But it was very challenging, because they didn't even grow up knowing much more than we were all in this globe with all these other kind of people. Because when you think of only about fifty years ago they thought the white people that came there were gods because they—gods or spirits because our skin was so light and so that we must know—that was the other thing I think trying to break that down. We know no more than you we have different experiences, but you also have tremendous experiences we have not had. You could survive in the wilderness. I might die on week two, you know, and I think always to—I think that was very important and I would say you know in anything in the scriptures or they'd say well how do you look at this? And I'd say, well, this is how I as an American and as a religious from the United States, this is how I look at it, but many of the

issues we face here were not their issues and I said, you know, this is how I would look at it but I want to know, through your eyes, how do you see it?

So I think that's one of the really good pieces that Papua New Guinea really strengthened in me and being with the people there. The other thing was the care for their elders. When I first came, I was really impressed about how they looked out for their elderly members. Unfortunately, I think that as development came and as jobs became more emphasized and having a job where you earn money, that respect for the elders who sometimes again were not able to be active in that way, couldn't be because of education, I think they were, I felt there was a decline in how the elders were treated and that's just in the 12 years I was there. I saw some changes happening.

Like one day I had a woman come to my door and she was a grandmother of a young woman who worked for us. We paid her, many of them helped us cook or make bread and stuff a lot of those extra things where you couldn't just go out to the store to do it and also help with our gardening. We would pay them and before long they'd be off in another job with a paid job, but I remember she brought home money and she was always giving some to her grandmother to take care of herself and the grandmother came to me one day and she showed me her back. She lifted up her blouse and it was all like stripes across and I said what happened and she said—I couldn't understand, she went, she didn't speak in pidgin. So she spoke in her local language, but I could pick up, you know, "My son wanted the money and I needed it and he beat me." And I thought that would never have happened before, you know, so I put some medicine on her wounds from the scratches. He must have beat her with a stick or whatever and her face was bruised her cheek was bruised and so I thought that was another thing that you didn't even need to know the language really and I just found if I just sat there and went, "Oh, I'm sorry, sorry." I mean they understood "sorry" and I just put my arm around her. That that was sufficient and tended to her wounds. So that was one of things that concern me.

That as well as their treatment of people who were obviously mentally ill in their areas. When I first came that was something that was very hard after working with people who were mentally ill and often because they were left on the fringes of society because of their disability. Who emotionally disturbed, here in our country, and going over there and the Sisters, I'll never forget my first week there I see him throwing buckets of water to get this mentally ill woman away from their yard. And they had a fence kind of around their yard with a gate. Mostly to keep the pigs out of their gardens and that. But you know when she came near that fence, they doused her with buckets of water and I said—I just, and the Sisters I was living with said, yeah that's what they do to mentally ill people here. I said, "Oh that can't, oh that's got to stop."

But again it was looking at the scripture and looking at how did Jesus treat people with disabilities? How did he treat the ones who were possessed by devils? That's what they said, but I said, "I bet today they would be classified as mentally ill, some of them." But he treated them all with compassion and for many of them who he healed, they were again part of the community because in those days if you were sick, you did something wrong and God was punishing you. And so what was Jesus's ministry, but to bring everybody again to oneness even if they are people with disabilities, people with mental illness. I said, "Probably what Paula needs is just for you to sit down and talk with her, just one of you and you've had listening skills. We've done this with you, how to listen to one another and you

know pick up the main points, how to encourage each other. You know how to do this you're doing it for each other. You also do it for people beyond your community. You know, no matter who they are." I said, "You're careful if somebody's not dangerous, but Paula is not dangerous. You know, I said, "She's very intelligent. She knows English. She had studied to be a nurse, but then I think flunked her exams, but she still knew a lot about nursing." I said, "You can ask her questions about nursing. What should you do if you see this in the village when you're going out. Get her involved. She's a smart woman, but, and listen to her troubles. And just say, ah, just say, 'You're sorry that she had to go through this' and but tap into her strengths." I said, "She's a good seamstress. Tell the people about that, 'Did you know Paula sews really well?' and maybe you can pay her a little bit for patching. You got a hole there." You know, and so they started to do that. She came to my sewing class and I had her, you know, she learned so quickly and I had her helping some of the other women learning sewing. So again that raised her status and I said, you know, these are the things that we need to do for her.

And one sister, in particular, Agnes, took a real interest in her and she said if some of the Sisters were still kind of looking like, oh my God, here goes Ann again with this idea of including everybody, and but, one of them said, I really think I want to try that. And she was herself a very good listener and I said, "You know, you don't have to give her anything but your attention. She doesn't get attention from people. People push her away. Or walk away from her. She starts to be helping. That's all she needs is your attention and to let her know that you heard what she said. So Agnes decided to take this on. And other ones, I just begged them, I said, I know it's cultural, but it's not gospel to throw buckets of water. And this is where, I said, in my culture too. I said, I think in my culture what we're really challenged to do is live more simply, so others can have what they need. Because many in our culture in the United States are homeless. I said, there are more homeless people in our country than you have in your country all together. I mean at that time it was like 6 million people, they said we're homeless in our country. And I said, you've got about 4 million people in your country. We have more homeless than you have in your population altogether.

I would use that as an example. So something is really wrong with our way of life and so I try to challenge myself to live simply, so others can have what they need, but maybe *this* is where your culture is gonna be challenged. Because they would always say, "Oh it's our culture, it's our culture on everything." And I'd say, "But it's not gospel is it? Now look, what would Jesus? Bring Jesus here, what Jesus do? What would Jesus say?" And it's like, oh yeah, oh yeah. I said, "Our cultures are meant to change and evolve. Don't use it as an excuse." I said, "Some things in your culture are wonderful." And I point out what I say, a much more community-oriented experience is in the States. Much more reaching out to your neighbors, to your line. I know you gotta extend that beyond just your own bloodline, but, you know. So I would say that's again that all made me one, you know, I mean it kind of all boils down to that. And how does that happen without us making changes in ourselves?

MEL: Sister Agnes heard you though?

SAVM: Yes, yeah. She got it. She got it. And she was probably from one of the most remote areas. Struggled the most and her studies because she hadn't had but grade six and she had to even work to get that because girls didn't go to school to grade six in many cases. So she was always, you know, trying to make up. And I think, she had a very

compassionate piece to her. Very gentle and in fact, you know, taking the name Agnes and I said, "Why did you take that name?" and she said, "Well you know when we got our Christian name they would get something that was close to our local name" and I said, "So your local name was," and she said, "Aki" And, um "A-K-I," I said, "Oh." And most of their names have meanings in their local language and I said, "What did yours mean in—she said, "white's—white skin." I said, "white skin?" She said, "Didn't you ever notice how much lighter I am the other Sisters? I'm lighter than my family. I got just a lighter skin and some people thought I was a mixed-race." She said, "I don't know that's the way I was made." I said, "Do you know what Agnes means? It means lamb, like gentle lamb," I said. And so we talked about Lamb of God that we say, and I said, "In the Latin that we said many years in our church, it was Agnus Dei." I said, "We say Lamb of God and that's where Agnes comes from." Agnus Dei, Agnus." "Ahh," she said. She was, I mean that's just, I thought it, her name. I just, I want you to know I think your name fits you very well because you are very gentle, you know, and she was always.

I mean, you know, we had some of them as postulants who are ready to fight, you know, physically. When they came, they just, that was their way in the Highlands. They fought with each other and that was one of the first things they had to learn, was we don't fight. We never physically do any harm to anybody and that sounds very basic to us. But that was a big piece for them as postulants, that they didn't hurt anyone, they learned how to listen to each other and resolve issues in peaceable ways. So that was kind of the test of how long they were postulants. That they could do that and be attentive to everybody else's needs and ideas.

I think that said a lot about community, so as long as they were trying to tend to community and I think that's very Franciscan too. I remember being told as a novice myself that we aren't just here for a cushy life in community. Yes we want to become friends, we want to become truly Sisters to each other, but the purpose for that is much bigger and it's so that we can promote being sisters and brothers to all. It's not just for us and I remember being very hit by that, you know, because I think many of us who came to religious life later than you know the Sisters I was living with over there in this late 60's and 70's, we came more for the sense of community than we did, we were thinking of the outreach and stuff we would do, in fact most of us had done some of that and I had worked and helped in an institution for mentally ill people helping play bingo and then I'd done Appalachia, you know, a trip down there in high school. So I had done that kind of outreach. So I had that kind of built in I think you know. But so that that whole piece I guess I just stressed that with them too. You need to learn to love one another and people have to see that and we talked.

I remember talking with them about the story of Francis and where he said "Come on brothers we're gonna go out and preach today." And they went out and they were just walking past and greeting people and they said, "But Francis, when are we gonna start preaching." He said, we have been preaching by the way we walk together and you know just take in and greet people. *That* is our preaching." And I said, "And that's what you hope," I said, "That's what I hear about my community when I go to other, you know, go run around to other places or to other people to give mission talks to help our work here," I said, "What I always hear from people, is, your community was one with the people. You didn't set yourself above. If there were classrooms to be cleaned and painted you were right there with our parents doing it. It was like, 'Wow this is different.'" I said, "Now what I hear about

our community by comparison to some of the other communities serving here is, oh you're the community that digs the barrets. So they had to dig these ditches on the side of the road so they would drain all the water there, but your Sisters are the ones that dig with us and that meant a lot to them. And I said, that's why we tried to witness this, we are not above the work. That's why we keep gardens because we are not above your people. They depend on those gardens and in a very real way, we do too. To cut down on our cost and you know that's true for you too. That the more you can keep your costs down by eating from your garden the more you will have for education and for supporting your young Sisters who draw no stipend from the diocese as yet.

So it was all those pieces put together. How to constantly not be foisting our ideas, but to let them do their own discerning with scripture and my life was so enriched by that and I remember when somebody over there brought me a Bible from the Philippines. Which was wonderful because all of the commentary down the sides was written from the perspective, it was good commentary if you think about the scripture scholarship of it, but it was also out of the Filipino perspective, which wasn't so different and many of those outlying islands as it was in Papua New Guinea. So anyway that's the Bible I kept when this—Paula was the one who asked me for my Bible when I left she was the mentally ill woman and she asked, she said, can I ask you for something. She said, "Can I have your Bible?" And I had two at that time, so I thought, hmmm, this is the Bible, I didn't want to give up my Filipino one. The other one was a gift for me for my final vows and had all my life story kind of written in it, which, not all real personal. I save that for my journal, but it had a lot of my own little commentary in there. And I thought, hmmm, what should I do here. I ended up you know showing her both of them. She said, I like that one and it has the tabs on it. She wanted to make it easy to find these passages and I said, "Okay, you can have this." I said, "I'm sorry I wrote all over it" and she said, "That's okay, I won't tell anybody."

And so you know, I gave that Bible to her and I felt really good afterwards, you know, as much as that was one of the things I was attached to, I thought, I could give that to her. Be free enough to give that to her. Enjoy her delight in having her very own Bible, which I'm sure she probably had numerous little New Testaments or whatever over the years, but yeah, and so I often think of her as one of the people who brought a turning point to the Sisters, you know, and a turning point to me certainly in trying to find ways that she could emphasize her gifts and be a considered part of a group again and she definitely became part of the sewing circle and she acted more normal as soon as she was treated, I said, she needs to be treated you know as a normal person. And we were able to get her to a psychologist. There was a Franciscan brother who was actually a psychiatrist and he met with her once and prescribed some medicine, which was a low dose of something that just you know helped her be more reasonable and not go off so often and so we were able to get that through some of the sisters who were there from Switzerland who could get drugs more easily. So all those pieces.

MEL: Sister, I'm interested, the postulantes when they came, they were coming from all over Papua New Guinea? Can you talk about their vocation, why they decided to come to you, because it sounds like you had many different, young women who came to you? So I'm trying to picture that.

SAVM: Well one thing we were very cautious of is that they weren't coming just for an

education because it was so difficult for women to be educated otherwise. So in order to try to weed that out, one of the things they were in touch with us for about four years before they joined the community. We would go to visit them in their villages and monthly in the mail, they would be sent some kind of reflection on scripture usually and then they had to send that back, what was their reflection on the scripture. What does it mean to them at this point in their life? But they also had to report on what they were doing in ministry in their parish and how they were involved. Then several times during that time usually one of us, like I would either go, or in the beginning just for a few months, excuse me, while I was there Sister Maureen, not Maureen, Noreen was a vocation director and sometimes I would go with her, initially, just to get kind of in touch with where these different tribes we're coming from. What was meaningful to them and how we could—one of the other things she was working on how can we make sure that our celebrations of vows are meaningful because it's so new, religious life is so new, and what do they do for marriages here and how is that done? So we learned that from different places we went and then I would take out some of the novices, we would go out on these little trips and they had these little plays they would do that were kind of based on Scripture and then they'd also talk about what was religious life in this country and so that was really good too, to see them promoting their own religious community, as well as, promoting ways where they had been changed in scripture with the people by dramatizing. The big drama was very big there, so we often use drama.

MEL: The plays were for the community or the plays were for themselves?

SAVM: Yes, well, well they did plays themselves too, but they would do these little plays for the community to show maybe where some things had to change because we were Christians now and so you know in a way they identified themselves and they would share their own stories of having had to change some things with their, like the pigs. Do you really need that many pigs and are you really sharing it with more people? Or, is it just your family? I mean they were raising all kind of questions that really had the people thinking and I don't remember any time that the people were you know kind of distrusting of that, but I think coming in because they were different lines and occasionally you had two lines that were at odds over something, whether it was land or bride-price or whatever and they would be both members of those two clans, might be under the same roof, and it was like if your clan had a grudge against somebody, you had a grudge against that group too and that was breaking down, I think, a lot from the women's groups because in some of the tribal fights that went on, it was the gardens that were first attacked because that would you know—they took away their food. They would burn their gardens.

Well the women started to make these alliances of if they burn our gardens we will give you food from our gardens of our men you know do this to your gardens because the women did most of the gardening and, all of it probably, the men kind of help with clearing the land, but, so there were alliances that we're building up between these warring groups, which you know, angered the men, but it also made them think, you know, we're gonna suffer because we're not gonna have enough food. Our wives are gonna give it away, but the wives also put themselves in danger by taking this risk of saying, You hurt them, we will give our food to the women, or they'd say, We won't cook for you, you know, you're gonna cook for yourself. Which was a tremendous change for these women to stand up in a very patriarchal culture. So that's how a lot of times the women would see.

The other piece is the gospel for the women in those cultures, they would say, they would use "Good news give him, me pella, or melli numba," which meant, 'It gives us dignity, the gospel, the way Jesus treated women.'" They were much more aware of that I think then even we in the United States, who are, you know we'd say, we maybe were more progressive, but they were catching on to that so fast, the way Jesus, the respect with which Jesus treated women, that they began to challenge some of the things that were going on, like the education of women. They said if you don't have educated mothers they're not going to be able to educate your children, get them ready for school.

So a lot of these things were coming into the culture and it was a time of great, really cultural change. And it was the gospel that was affecting it, you know, not some of the young friars or some of the more conservative priests that came in from more oppressive countries, you might say, came with this idea that, we, women from the States where foisting our feminism on them: You Sisters in the United States, it's all feminism, feminism. I said, "No they're getting this from the gospel. I don't have to say a thing and I haven't. I question why they're less than, if God says, "We're all created equal." They're getting this from the gospel, if this is how Jesus treated women, then why are we treated differently? Why aren't we on the parish council? Why aren't we in these decision-making groups?" And in some places they always had a woman, but it usually was a woman had more masculine traits that was invited to be with the head men in an area.

So, I think when young women came to us they were coming out of that kind of milieu. Like here's where I can get educated, but they also knew, you know, that we expected them to exercise leadership in their communities and not just to be on top, but to use whatever they had, whatever skills to enable other people because some had attended vocational arts schools that were run. We had some in our diocese so they knew how to sew. I said, that's not just for yourself and your community. You gotta be teaching that out here. Anything you've learned. They learned about good nutrition. Okay you can teach the women that in these areas for foreign areas where you go. So whatever knowledge you have, you try to use it and adapt it. So when they were postulants, they were coming sometimes out of this animosity between tribes, but they also are not accustomed to living with people and calling them "Sister." That had been outside their realm in another tribe, so that was a huge thing to learn to build community to learn to care about to learn to share at some depth what's, what your life has been, how you grew up. And they listen to how others grew up and what was important in their families, what's important in your family and what kind of celebrations? And birthdays, often they didn't know when they were born. They had a general idea and why they had the name they had. What was their local name? Why were they named that? I mean, um, just all those little things, well actually, we as missionaries were trying to connect with more and to have them learn how to do that with one another, to help each other in your studies. If you've got, if you're a year beyond in your studies, then help the ones who are not. What you have is gift and share it, a gift to somebody else was kind of the focus and learning.

I remember one of the things I dealt with, with novices yet too, when I had people from four different, I had four novices and they for all from different tribes and it was like even as novices there were arguments about how to make the mounds in the gardens. And I can't remember if I shared that before, but some had long mounds in their area, other ones had rounded mounts, other ones had square mounts, other ones didn't make mounds, they dug trenches in the ground and it was the mound, but they were trenches instead of you know

piling up dirt. So all of that, I said, well, what do you think we should do? Well, I think our mounds are the best. I think they produce better and of course everybody thought that about their mounds and I said, "Well, what if we had some of each, in the garden? Why not?" And they go, "Oh yeah, we could do that." So you know, but it was something we had to negotiate and say everybody's are great. After a while, their mounds looked more like the mounds in the area of the people where they were living, you know and they could see, okay, this is another way, where we can be seen as one with them, wherever we go our mounds can look like the mounds in the area. Now that sounds very simple, but it speaks. So, I mean those were some of the things, kind of things we dealt with, yeah, early on.

MEL: They graduated and then left the community to go other parishes?

SAVM: That's right, well after they went through their novitiate, they would be living with other Sisters usually, you know, people who had been around a while and out, some of them were living, well, initially, we were just kind of in the places where we had our missions developed. We had gosh how many in that diocese? Probably a good twelve main stations and so they were mostly like in Pangu's main station, in Det, in Mendi, in Kagua was where they started out. But now they're even living out what as they became more they moved out and they lived in houses like the people do in the village, so they kind of had very simple houses in the main stations, but then they decided we've got to move out as we develop and we live—the people would help them build their house and we would live in bush houses with the people and the villages where we kind of stayed so we're not so dependent on wheels to get around because people don't have cars.

And that was the other thing. They basically got around on the public transportation, which were the back of pickup trucks and bigger trucks. They had one car when I—actually they didn't have, they used ours. But they had, right after I left, I think or no—it was right before I left, they had one truck for one of the far-flung missions, so they could get their supplies back and forth and when they had a significant number of people in Kagua, they needed that, you know, because we had the van but they said it's just too hard, our roads are getting worse and worse and we need something. We can maneuver on those roads. So that was another whole discernment. Should it be a used vehicle or how much can we get for our van? For one of them said, I know one of my one talks? who really wants that van and you know we can trade it through this company that he works for and he will get it for a good price, but we will get what we deserve for this van because it's still in good shape. So really what they got for that van, they were able to buy the truck even though the van was several years old and had you know been—it was still well taken care of, but it looked almost brand new. So they didn't have to put out much money to get this more heavy-duty truck and the brothers knew how to build a cover for it on the back so they could put a tarp and enclose it. So it was that kind of stuff too, our—that's what our people drive they drive—a village has a truck. So and we gave them I think of one of our cars when we left, they got you know one of our cars so they could maneuver around Mendi, that area and also to help people get to hospitals. It was another thing sometimes when they were far from—so often and that's what we did. We were kind of the ambulance system as missionaries for people who were in dire need.

MEL: So these postulates are now the teachers of new young postulates.

SAVM: Yeah that's right. Yeah and they gradually took over their own formation as with novices and postulants and so we were there to support them and what they were doing and I still would do that when I was over here if I found a book that I thought was good, I would send it to them or some of our Sisters worked on turning it into what we call our translating if you will into controlled English means, you know, just taking out what they call the expense of English and putting into words that were understandable if we found books that were, you know, good. Like we had a good one by Henry Nouwen on leadership and that one we translated into simple English and then from there one of the friars saw that, and he said, "Ah man, this is what I need for my leaders in my church." So he translated the whole thing into pidgin. So we did some of that too, went from the English, simplified English into pidgin for some of the things we did.

MEL: For today, is there anything you'd like to end with? You've shared so much.

SAVM: I think, just that, you just wish everybody could have the experience, I mean, this Sunday's Gospel is just wonderful about Jesus speaking to the Canaanite woman who wanted her child cured and there are many different interpretations of that gospel, but even the other one, I think it's from Isaiah, the other readings are all about widening the space of your tent and I think that is my message. We have to be constantly about widening the space of your tent. It's as easy as how we meet someone who seems different than us. Someone we wouldn't maybe likely approach. It's like the guy that came on my porch yesterday and said, "Sister, I'm trying to get enough money to get my tuition together for Cincinnati State. I'm doing two years there, I want to become a psychologist." And he would, you could tell, this guy had his life set for where he's gonna go. His clothes were not, I mean, they weren't the best. I tell you his shoes were kind of ratty, but he said, "I really need to make money and they gave us at Cincinnati State, they gave us all a box of candy that we could sell. These boxes we have to take two dollars back to the school, but if we can sell it for more than that," he said, "I'm trying to sell mine for six dollars because four dollars a box, if I can save that up, I can pay from my tuition this year." And I said, "Why do you want to become a psychologist?"

So I just kind of engaged him in conversation. He said, "Oh," he said, "Look around here. All these young people who are getting in trouble, a lot of them have no father figures" he said, "I feel like as a psychologist, if I get that training, I might be a better father figure for some of these kids who have nobody to talk to." And he was, I could just tell he was so taken with this and I said, "Well I'm glad to give you six dollars," I said, "That's all I got in money right now (laughs), I can't give you anymore, I can't buy another box, but I'm gonna tell you I'm gonna be praying for you that you get lots of good buyers here and that you get to do what you want, this is wonderful. He said, "Are you a teacher?" And I said, "Yes" (laughs). He said, "I can tell." But, you know it's that kind—I felt so honored, you know, I felt so hopeful after our chat because he was, he was the real stuff, you know, he wasn't trying to take advantage of anybody. And so it's that piece that you know, gosh, the gifts we get given when we just widen our tents. Amen.

MEL: Sister, thank you very much.

SAVM: You're very welcome.