

The Elephant in the Water

From Laudato Si in Catholic classrooms to clean water in a Tanzanian village

Sometimes it literally takes acknowledging the elephant in the room (or, in this case, in the water) to see the possibility for change.

Call and Response

For Erie Benedictine Sister Marian Wehler and Sister of Mercy Tina Geiger, co-directors of Catholic Rural Ministries (CRM) in Oil City, Pennsylvania, where they serve sixteen parishes and four Catholic grade schools, it was elephants who tipped the scales toward events that culminated in a mission trip in November 2024 to Tanzania with nine local women and men.

Sister Marian, who had lived in Tanzania from 1980-1987, received a call from Saningo Millitary, a former co-worker there, who told her his village needed help to fund the digging of a reservoir. Their current water source in the drought-ridden area was a five-mile walk for the women of the Maasai village—and elephants, also in search of water, had taken it over making it dangerous for the women! “Could you possibly help us fund the project?” Saningo asked.

The sisters had been promoting Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si* (Care for Our Common Home) in the classrooms of the Catholic schools and the students were already aware of the need to conserve and protect water locally. After Saningo’s request, the plight of the Maasai villagers became the sisters’ 2023 Earth Day story and an opportunity to broaden the students’ understanding of global needs for potable water.

“We had also read the Sisters of Mercy “Mercy Global Action” newsletter announcing “Mercy Launches Water Campaign on World Water Day 2023,” and offering resources for use in schools and parishes—perfect for Earth Day education,” explained Sister Tina.

It all came together and the local students responded enthusiastically, quickly collecting over \$1,300 for what became the “Life-Giving Water Project.” Inspired by the students, generous parishioners, friends, and organizations began to contribute and by October 2023 the community had raised more than \$7,000 and reservoir digging began. The rains came early, and the Maasai village had water again.

Why not visit?

In a flash of insight, the thought occurred to Sisters Marian and Tina to gather a group to go to Tanzania, visit the villagers, and see the reservoir. Synchronicities appeared that only served to strengthen their resolve to make the trip happen.

Thanks to a chance meeting they discovered that a former Catholic school student, Madison Weaver, had always wanted to go to Africa. “We met her and learned that she had studied public health, in particular water safety, sanitation and hygiene,” said Marian.

In another fortuitous meeting they learned about Water By Women (WBW), located in Louisville, Kentucky. WBW trains women around the world to use water filters to clean water and save lives, especially those of small children. “Sister Lorraine Lauter, WBW director, was very interested in getting their water filtering into areas of Tanzania,” said Sister Tina. They had Saningo speak with WBW to explain their situation and learned that 42 filters would serve his village and reach over 180 families.

Madison happily agreed to become a WBW International Water Filtration System Trainer. Between social media and a story about the mission trip to Africa in the local newspaper, Water By Women had sufficient sponsors for the necessary filters.

Meanwhile, inquiries about the trip continued to come in from the invitations the sisters had sent to local parishes. By September 2024, nine people were ready to make the mission trip with Sister Marian and Sister Tina: Jim and Vicki Stec, Lucas and Denise Stec, Susan Jenczka, Nancy Tomassoni, Joan Eighmey, Barbara Feroz, and Madison Weaver. Susan, Nancy, and Joan are Oblates of Mount Saint Benedict Monastery. In addition to visiting the people of the village, experiencing their culture, and seeing the reservoir their communities had helped fund, they would also be delivering water filters and training the local women in their use.





The group arrived in Tanzania on November 9 where Saningo and Fr. Faustine Mosha were waiting for them. Fr. Faustine, a former student of Sister Marian, is Director of Development for the Diocese of Arusha. He and Saningo helped coordinate the group's two weeks in Tanzania.

On the first day Fr. Faustine introduced the visitors to the people of Holy Spirit Parish. Joan, a parish musician and choir leader, and her sister Nancy had eagerly anticipated experiencing African music. "We were elated at the joyous singing and music of the parishioners in the packed full church," they shared.

"We visited the Arusha Catholic Seminary, known as Oldonyo Sambu, located on the slopes of Mt. Meru. Sister Marian had taught at the school in the 1980s and was delighted to visit. Fr. Moses Assey, the current rector of the school, was a small boy in the nearby village when Sister Marian taught there: "I have fond memories of his family attending Mass at our chapel. Helena, who was seven at the time, and Moses, five, would help us to care for our rabbit project." A larger chapel is under construction because there are now over 200 students and the school is still growing. Solar energy is planned.

Sister Tina speaks to the students. "It is so impressive to see their desire for a good education."



The Benedictine Nuns (OCam) at St. Catherine Monastery in Karatu offered the members of the mission trip generous hospitality. "Sister Noela had dinner waiting for us and we enjoyed hearing how the community was founded in 2002. Hospitality to travelers and sharing what food they can from their shambas (gardens) is their main outreach and means of support," said Sister Marian. They built walls around their gardens and raise bees for honey, both ways to deter their elephant neighbors from invading the garden. The sisters are eager to find new ways to help the women and children of the area.

Saningo and drivers, Simon and his son Eddie, experienced guides, showed the group around the congested city of Arusha and answered questions about life and culture. They toured bush areas, smaller villages, and savanna. At Tarangire National Park they were awed by elephants, zebras, and other wild life.

"Going into the Serengeti, we stopped to watch the women fetching water with their buckets and using donkeys to help transport the water back to their villages," said Barbara. "I was shocked, it was one thing seeing this in pictures and another watching it in real life."





"As we arrived at the primary school, we were welcomed by a long line of women dancing and in the background we heard the students practicing a song in English, 'Monday, Tuesday, etc.' The gift of welcoming and hospitality rang out loudly and it was the first thing our mission group spoke about during and after the trip," said Sister Marian. "Would we treat strangers to our home or village as warmly as they did to us?" Vicki wondered. The children were delighted with gifts of t-shirts, backpacks, and soccer balls. "Our conversation with them was translated, and Barbara, a former pre-school teacher, led the children in a favorite movement song, 'Head, shoulders, knees, and toes.' The children honored each of us by personally putting colorful beads, handcrafted by their mothers, around our necks."



Water filter training day

Twenty village women arrived for the training that Madison led. Lucas and Jim prepared the five-gallon buckets by drilling holes for the water filter hose. Susan, Barbara, Sister Tina, and Sister Marian took turns reading from the manual which was written in English and Swahili while Roco, an educated village leader, translated into the Maasai language for the women.

Madison demonstrated how the filters work and how to back-flush them so that they would continue to function indefinitely. She noted that, "When they saw the dirty water that filled the bucket coming out of the filter as clean water, there were joyful shouts and clapping. They were eager to try the water, to drink it."

Madison continued, "I was surprised. Water By Women had told me that it was common for women to hesitate when offered the filtered water. Our Water Women didn't. During the training, they were engaged, enthusiastic, and accepting, showing a level

of trust between us and them, which is fundamental to successful humanitarian aid. Saningo acted as a bridge for us. By ensuring that his village and our group received appropriate preparation, guidance, and knowledge, trust was fostered from mutual respect, openness, understanding, and collaboration."

The women chose two leaders among themselves who would gather the village women monthly for guidance and support. A simple booklet was given to each woman that illustrated the procedure and one they could easily use with their families.

Now "Water Women" women, each one committed to share her filter with three other women so more families would have safe drinking water. The Water Women leaders would also help to train other village women who were not able to attend Madison's training. "We take care of each other," they said.



Left, Sister Marian and students from St. Joseph School in Lucinda, display water filters and instruction booklets that will go to Tanzania.

Right, Madison demonstrates dispensing filtered water once the buckets have been fitted with the filters.





Village women with their water buckets gather with their North American visitors after their Waterwomen training. Clean water for their village, and especially the children, will decrease water-born illnesses and parasites and support general overall health.



Sister Tina helps distribute filter use instruction manuals.

Asante sana, Mungu (Thank you, God)

"We are certainly trying to be good stewards who care for the earth and care for the poor as we continue to authentically encounter Christ in the One Whole Earth Community," said Sister Tina. "And we know that those who accompanied us on this mission trip have been changed, and as they share their experience, they will continue to invite others to live differently," added Sister Marian.



Maddy shows the difference between filtered and unfiltered water.

Before the group left the village, the women came with gifts of bracelets and necklaces. Village women and men sang and danced and invited the visiting missionaries to join them. "It was a wonderful, embodied expression of gratitude," said Madison, who received a special necklace. "It was such a powerful moment, I will never forget it. This project was an important step to improving the quality of life for twenty Water Women, their families, and many more to follow. However, the reality is that humanitarian work is constant and perpetual, faced with emerging challenges, and requires ongoing efforts. Access to clean and safe water for one Maasai village is just a drop in the bucket."

Sister Marian added, "We come back more aware of how privileged we are with opportunities for education, clean water, nutritious food, and so many other resources. We come back more aware of what most people in the world lack and need. Each day we can be more grateful for the gift of water that our Creator has given in abundance for all. We are



The water mission group: (Back row) Jim Stec, Susan Jenczka, Denise Stec, Lucas Stec, Sister Tina, Vicki Stec. (Middle row) Nancy Tomassoni, Joan Eighmey, Barbara Feroz, Sister Marian. (Seated) Saningo Millinary and Madison Weaver.

grateful for life and for the elephants who are an important part of the Tanzanian eco-system and who inadvertently became the cause of our life-changing mission trip," said Sister Marian. "Asante sana, Mungu!"