News
Ministry



Fr. Ajeesh Chirayarikil, left foreground, helps Sr. Lisset Vadakkekara, at right in blue, administer an IV drip to a woman with COVID-19 symptoms in front of Jyoti clinic, managed by Congregation of Mother Carmel nuns at Chachana village in Gujarat, western India. (Courtesy of Chetan Parmar)



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Few years have felt as connected to the previous one as 2021 — largely because the global pandemic which raged in 2020 continued to do so in 2021, dominating life and news everywhere.

While some progress was made — with sisters helping efforts to curb the pandemic — vaccination disparities continue throughout the world. And as 2021 ended, even as the delta variant that appeared midyear was still affecting many areas, the global community faced anxieties about a new strain of COVID-19 with the omicron variant.

There were other challenges in 2021 — serious ones. Climate change and the need to protect the Earth became even more prominent issues. So did racism and its reckoning, particularly among sister congregations. The Jan. 6 riots and a new U.S. administration grappling with ever-present problems made headlines. Sisters responded critically to the Biden administration's migration policy, and also reacted to continuing social unrest in Haiti and ongoing violence in South Sudan as the country marked 10 years of independence.

Related: In GSR's 2021 columns, sisters from across the globe told amazing stories



Ursuline Sr. Jacinta Powers puts a mask on a child at the migrant camp in Matamoros, Mexico, so the girl could go to school. (Courtesy of Jacinta Powers)

Sisters also responded with commitment and care in attentive ministries offering hope to Afghan refugees, those experiencing homelessness, and facing discrimination because of Albinism.

Here is a rundown of 2021 as chronicled in Global Sisters Report.

Global pandemic continues

National correspondent Dan Stockman began our novel coronavirus 2021 coverage with an "explainer story" about how and when sisters would be able to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Shortly after that, reporting by staff writer Soli Salgado and freelancer Nuri Vallbona focused on how sisters were ministering to migrants along the U.S.-Mexican border during the pandemic.

We did several reports on the very uneven vaccine rollout in which sisters and other advocates warned about wealthy countries receiving most of the supply, leaving little for countries in the global south. Their concerns that leaving many unvaccinated would put everyone at risk now seems prescient. And with new variants, the situation worsened throughout the year.

Our "on-the-ground" international reporting on the pandemic included stories from India and Vietnam. A roundup of dispatches from sisters in India in May provided poignant testimonies at a time when the delta variant was wreaking havoc in India before it was fully recognized globally.

In June, Saji Thomas reported on sisters taking to the streets to offer medical care to those refused by hospitals in Gujarat, India. In Vietnam, Joachim Pham updated readers about challenges there, reporting on how sisters redoubled efforts to feed the disadvantaged, especially those dealing with pandemic restrictions in Ho Chi Minh City.



Dominican sisters in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, prepare raw fruits and roots in their motherhouse's yard before giving them to people affected by COVID-19. (Courtesy of Mary Nguyen Thi Minh Du)

A focus of some of our COVID-19 reporting was on how sisters coped personally with the pandemic. Salgado profiled sisters living alone or far from their communities and how the pandemic had affected their spiritual and social lives. And freelancer Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans reported on how sisters maintained their faith during pandemic times.

In September, Stockman provided an update about the COVID-19 situation in the United States, and how the delta variant affected sisters in health care as well as how sisters are involved in ongoing vaccination efforts. And in October, Salgado provided a "big-picture" look at how COVID-19 was affecting various Latin American countries.

Looking at one of the many economic fallout effects of the pandemic, Salgado also wrote about sisters who were ministering to those struggling with rent payments. Some were organizing fundraisers for rent and utility relief, hoping to help renters chip away at their growing bills.

Rounding out our COVID-19 coverage was a fascinating story by Salgado about a little-known campaign and ministry by sisters that affirms the lives and work of seafarers, whose struggles during the pandemic have been rarely acknowledged.



Sr. Mary Leahy poses for a selfie at Port Botany in Sydney, Australia, with Philippine seafarers "who were so excited to receive a care package." (Courtesy of Mary Leahy)

Challenge of climate change

Throughout 2021, GSR reported on the ways sisters are responding to climate change and preserve creation. A centerpiece of this reporting was a series of stories in collaboration with National Catholic Reporter's EarthBeat called An Estate Plan for the Earth which focused on religious congregations protecting congregational

property from development through land and conservation easements.

We augmented the coverage with a Witness & Grace presentation — one of nine such special sessions on a variety of topics. If you missed them the first time, you can check them out here.

GSR also initiated a series of stories on "just transition" — part of a growing lexicon about moving from an economy based on fossil fuels to clean energy. The series' first story, an overview, asked what the term "just transition" means and how sisters are playing roles in creating such a transition.

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Later stories in the series included a focus on sisters in the United States who are seeking ways to care for communities facing economic shifts and energy-related transitions. Another reported on how sister-led farms in the Hudson River Valley in New York are contributing to more sustainable farming practices.

Correspondent Doreen Ajiambo reported from Malawi on the efforts of Carmelite Missionary sisters to limit deforestation through a tree-planting project.

And throughout the year, we conveyed sisters' engagement with climate-related advocacy efforts, including reaction to the United Nations' COP26 November meetings in Glasgow, Scotland.



The restored prairieland conserved by the Sisters of St. Francis near Dubuque, Iowa, includes land that was farmed by the first sisters to arrive in the area. (EarthBeat photo/Brian Roewe)

Border and migration

Sisters expressed high hopes for incoming President Joe Biden and a possible change of U.S. migration policy, among a long wish list, Stockman reported.



President-elect Joe Biden announces his Justice Department nominees Jan. 7, 2021, at his transition headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

One hundred days into his administration, sisters interviewed by GSR said they were generally happy with Biden but said they were dissatisfied with his handling of immigration-related issues, particularly at the U.S-Mexico border. In another story Salgado reported that a lack of a U.S. plan for asylum-seekers at the border was cause for concern and disappointment.

In October, sisters took an even more critical position, saying they were outraged by the mistreatment of Haitians seeking asylum who tried to enter the United States at the U.S.-Mexican border. But throughout, sisters continued to minister to recent migrants in the United States, including those far from the border, Salgado reported.

Taking special place in our coverage of migration and the border was a "*Frontera*" photo essay by photographer Lisa Elmaleh, with accompanying text by Salgado which movingly portrayed the human aspects of the migration story, including photographs of sisters in their ministries.



Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters and associates stand outside the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan del Valle in San Juan, Texas. The group spent about two weeks volunteering at the Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen. From left: Sr. LouAnne Willette, Sr. Margery Race, associate Sara Roberts, associate Paula McKenzie, associate Elly Pick and Sr. Helen Marie Raycraft. (© Lisa Elmaleh)

Other themes

GSR published a host of other interesting and valuable stories throughout 2021, highlighting the lives and work of sisters globally and in the United States.

Racism was a theme tackled by Stockman and freelancer Peter Tran. Stockman's August story examined efforts by U.S-based congregations to combat racism by first addressing their own failures. Tran's July report focused on Asian and Asian American sisters in the United States speaking out against incidents of racism —

including those they had experienced themselves.



At the 2012 bicentennial of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky, Sr. Theresa Knabel and sculptor Edward Hamilton unveiled a plaque honoring the enslaved people owned by the congregation until the end of the Civil War. (Courtesy of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth)

A major story by Ajiambo from Kenya focused on a protracted and bitter legal dispute between a Nairobi-based congregation and a former Maryknoll priest over control of two hospitals — a battle depriving poor residents access to needed health services.

From Malawi, Ajiambo profiled a group of Teresian Sisters in work to stem violence against people with albinism who face constant harassment, discrimination and death threats.



Sr. Beatrice Mbilima of the Teresian Sisters (second from left) visits Loness Masautso's family in Mtendere, a large village some 60 miles south of the Malawian capital of Lilongwe. The sister with her congregation is working to improve the lives of people with albinism in southern Malawi. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Among the many noteworthy Q & A features of the year, Salgado's interview with Sr. Silvia Gutierrez, a member of the Immaculate Heart Community and executive director of Safe Parking LA, stood out for highlighting an unusual ministry in Los Angeles serving the homeless who live out of their parked cars.

Another major project of the year was a two-part set of stories by former GSR staffer Dawn Araujo-Hawkins on sexual abuse of children by sisters. Abuse survivors told Araujo-Hawkins they feel that their experiences and trauma have been largely overlooked and ignored.

From India, Saji Thomas, a correspondent with Matters India, which has a partnership with Global Sisters Report, provided ongoing coverage of the trial of

Bishop Franco Mulakkal of the Punjabi city of Jalandhar, who stands accused of raping a former superior general of the Missionaries of Jesus.

Among the sisters GSR profiled was Sr. Simone Campbell, who after 40 years retired from the Catholic social justice network Network. In his profile, Stockman noted that Campbell was not sure what her next step would be, but that she was confident that the Spirit would lead the way.



Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of Network, a Catholic social justice lobby, speaks at a rally questioning the 2017 tax cut law at Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries headquarters Oct. 20, 2018, in Cleveland. She will step down from Network in March after having headed the organization since 2004. (CNS/Dennis Sadowski)

With the arrival of Advent came reporting about a revival of interest in monasticism. Salgado's December story noted that monastic traditions — "including stability, silence, community, hospitality, love of learning, and continual growth, to name a few — are speaking to this moment, and those ranging from the nonreligious to

apostolic Catholic sisters are listening."

Be assured that we at Global Sisters Report are listening too — eager to report on trends in religious life, sisters' ministries and issues of interest to women religious and those they serve. Since 2014, we've been striving to fulfill our mission to be a "dynamic online community that reports on and gives voice to women religious around the world." If you have an idea for a story, a suggestion for a Q & A with a sister, or want to join our more than 340 columnists from around the world, please send us an email at info@globalsistersreport.org

And let's pray we have brighter news to report next year!