News



A train carries coal near Ravenna, Kentucky, Aug. 21, 2014. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

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For years, the ministries of Catholic religious sisters — working tirelessly and often invisibly — have left their mark on Appalachia's rural communities, sharing the love of Jesus Christ by their witness and service to the people who call "the Mountains" their home.

For the past 13 years, Sr. Angela Keil has worked here alongside Sr. Marge Eilerman, members of the Sisters of St. Francis, based in Tiffin, Ohio. Eilerman is herself a veteran of 40 years in the region.

Based at Holy Family Catholic Church, located in Booneville, Kentucky, the sisters have worked alongside the Diocese of Lexington's office of peace and justice, to assist residents who lost nearly everything they had from catastrophic floods that struck last summer.

"This is an area where substandard housing has always been a problem, and we are helping a half-dozen homeowners whose dwellings were seriously damaged by the floods," Keil told OSV News.

Booneville, named after legendary frontiersman Daniel Boone, is the seat of Owsley County, the second poorest county in the United States.

"We have 16 registered families in our parish, and despite Booneville's population being just 81 persons (according to the 2010 census), we still hold an annual graduation breakfast for our high-school seniors, whose graduating class this year totaled 50 students," Keil said.

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The sisters have worked on post-flood recovery efforts in the area, helped through their nonprofit arrangement with Partnership Housing, "which has created at least 30 new homes while also rehabbing trailers and other structures."

"I like the teamwork that we all have with Sister Marge, and the people living here are very special," Keil said about her time spent in "the Mountains."

"We are able to help them with utility payments, travel expenses, and when a family member dies and they need money for funeral expenses, we help there too," she said.

The sister credited her mission parish's "large donor network stretching across the country," including seven parishes in Ohio, New York and Michigan, for giving them the ability to accomplish as much as they do.

"Their generosity allows us, among many other blessings, to host our annual Christmas program which provides clothes, food, and household items," Keil said.

Keil said the trust between the sisters and the people of the Mountains is hard won. When Eilerman arrived in 1986, she said, "there were places that would not even rent to Catholics."

"People have gotten to know us, but it has taken a long time to break down the walls," Keil said.

Sr. Elizabeth Wehri's home base is at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Mt. Sterling, Kentucky. She has belonged to the Congregation of Divine Providence for 56 years.

"A lot of my work here is centered around faith formation, and I function as the connection between the church and these people whom I love working with as I prepare them to receive the sacraments," Wehri said.

The sister holds weekly Scripture studies in Spanish and in English where they reflect on the upcoming Sunday readings which help them share "their faith and their lived experiences in relation to the Gospel."

"My goal with these Scripture groups has been for people to come to know and love Jesus Christ," Wehri said.



Road signs lay on the side porch of a house near Kermit, West Virginia, Aug. 20, 2014. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

Mt. Sterling's combined Catholic population she estimates "at less than 2%." But the Hispanic Catholic community here has a "deep devotion and faith" manifested particularly on Our Lady of Guadalupe's feast day and the nine days before Christmas.

Many families also do not attend church regularly but might arrive on feast days.

"I address their various social needs through family visitation when I can, and I try to keep them connected to the church," Wehri said, "especially in the case of fires, illness, and the like, where I then become a liaison to various community agencies."

The sister is also proud of a new gardening project she recently embarked on with several adult parishioners at St. Patrick's in response to Pope Francis' "*Laudato Si*'" encyclical, on caring for the earth.

"Our mission is wherever we are," she said. "And bringing the Good News that each person is loved by God and deserving of respect shown by the way we serve, is (in itself) a blessing — to those who give and to those who receive."

Over in Lawrence County, Sr. Patricia Cataldi, a member of the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood, ministers with medical expertise she gained following her entrance into the convent. After medical school, she specialized in general surgery, working from 1982-2000 in hospitals in the Caribbean's Saint Lucia and also in Zimbabwe.

"After returning to the States in 2000, I came to Eastern Kentucky because it was an area of great medical need," Cataldi said.

Here she worked in surgery and wound care practice, including serving people incarcerated at Big Sandy, the maximum security federal prison in Martin County.

"There I did surgical consultations and minor procedures, while more serious operations were done away from the prison with four guards along for security," the sister added.

Thanks to her status as a physician and religious sister, Cataldi has helped the local community tackle the issues of substance abuse and the prevention of suicide.

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> — Sr. Elizabeth Wehri
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Since retiring, Cataldi has been a catechist for confirmation preparation (sometimes working with entire families) — in addition to the liturgy planning, music ministry, and other work she does at St. Jude Catholic Church in Louisa, Kentucky.

"Our young people are often the only Catholic in their class, or even in the school," she said. "Providing faith formation, therefore, is challenging because of the small

numbers of people and the distances which they travel just to come to church."

Just ordinary, daily living — or even survival — "includes coping with large travel distances (and) food insecurity."

"Winter travel for school buses is problematic with schools closing due to over 500 miles of gravel roads," she said.

The sister is quite proud of "God's Food Pantry," which serves Lawrence County on a weekly basis and is supplied by "God's Food Bank" in Lexington. Staffed solely by volunteers, she said, the pantry "is a truly ecumenical endeavor."

"Working with those who find joy in helping others, whose faith is strong despite the sorrows in their own lives, challenges me to live my faith, to find God in all around me," she said. "To learn to forget self as Christ did when he gave all for us."

Sr. Loretta Spotila, a registered nurse for 45 years and a member of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine for over 50 years, told OSV News she moved to Eastern Kentucky's Estill County, because, "I had said 'yes' to God's call with a willing heart."

She founded the Interfaith Wellness Ministry nonprofit in 1997, "which to this day provides education and resources to encourage the health and wellness of our community," said Sister Loretta.

"There I began doing mission and outreach work in Appalachia," she said, starting at a small Catholic hospital in Irvine, Kentucky.



Sr. Loretta Spotila, a member of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, who is the founder of the Interfaith Wellness Ministry in Estill County, Kentucky, back right, is pictured in an undated photo leading a fitness class. (OSV News/Courtresy of Sr. Loretta Spotila)

She noted the ministry has made slow progress, but there is much more left to do.

"We have very few resources here," she said. "There are a handful of grocery stores, no transportation, no decent secondary roads — it is like living in another world, compared to a big city elsewhere."

She cautioned, however, that relationships are key.

"You can have all of the social programs in the world, but if the people don't know you, good intentions won't work," she said.

"I learned early on that you accomplish more with a group than you do talking one on one, but you must go where the people are — for example, to Baptist churches on Wednesday church night."

She also credited her other Catholic religious sisters for building a bridge of trust that allowed her to have her successes.

"The women in Estill County already trusted them, having grown fond of them at the local hospital when they were patients," she said, "and that made my job easier."

Yet as her retirement draws closer, she observed an issue the church must come to terms with — who will step into the sisters' well-worn shoes in "the Mountains"?

"We are coming to the end of our time here," Spotila said, "and when I retire and return home (to the mother house in Cleveland) there are no new ones coming along."

Donna M. Crow, the Interfaith Wellness Ministry's executive director, shared with OSV News that the sisters have "created their own brand of social services where none existed before."

"The absence of their ministries, and the gaps they filled, will mark a noticeable void, if not picked up by lay people," she said.

Crow noted that anyone following in their footsteps will have to do what she observed Spotila do so well: learn the Appalachian culture and customs of its Mountain people.

"The positive impact sisters of various faith communities have had in Appalachia cannot be overstated," Crow said. "When they are no longer here, that is when they will be noticed."