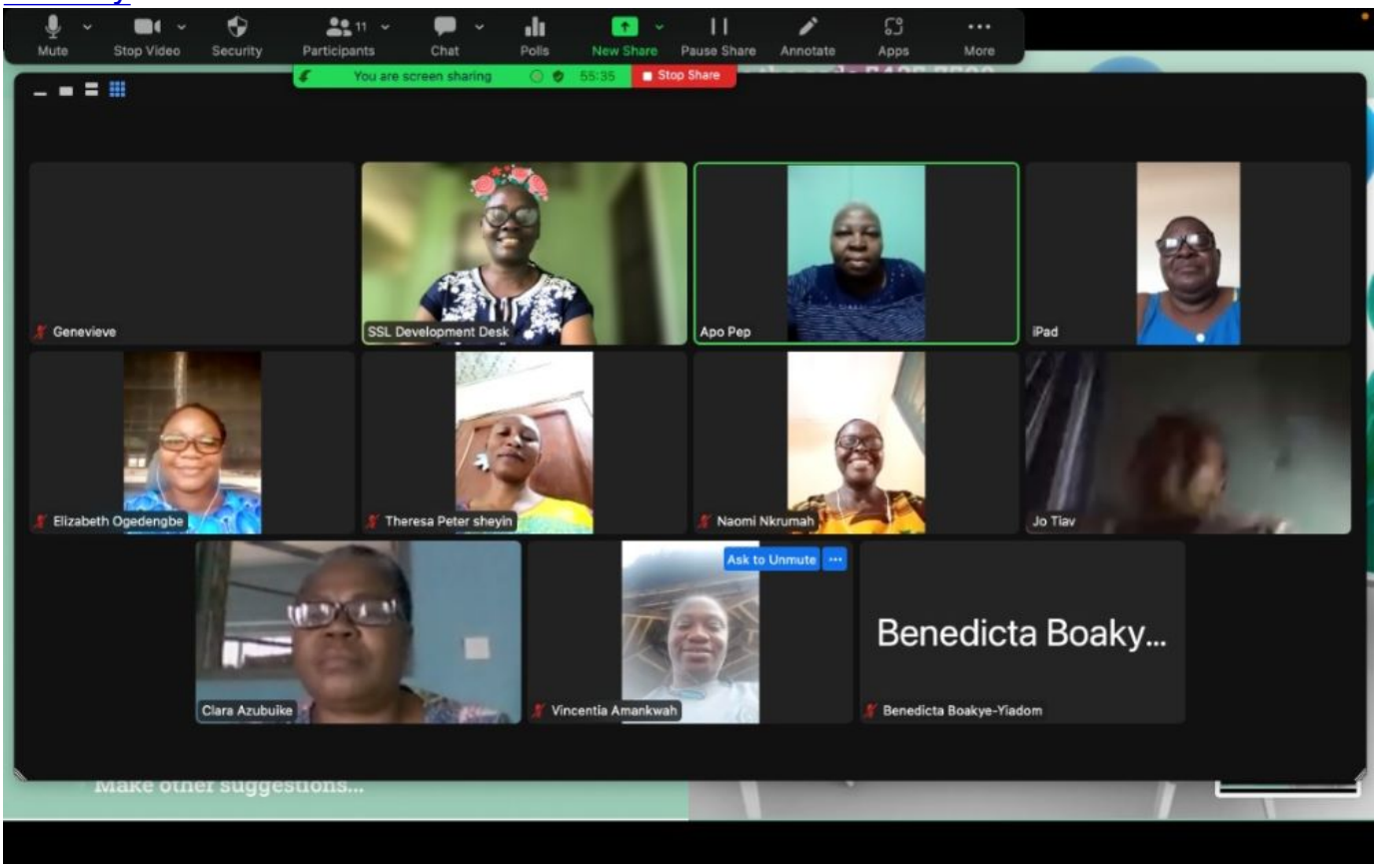
Columns
Ministry



Fifteen sisters from Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana and Nigeria participate in an online training session July 3 to become safeguarders. St. Louis Sr. Theresa Olaniyan, coordinator of Child Protection and Vulnerable Adult Safeguarding for Nigeria Province, facilitated the session. (Screen capture/Naomi Kkrumah)



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The COVID-19 pandemic has changed what we thought was normal to a "new normal" in our ways of doing things in the world. What we at first saw as only negative brought us to see that changes can be positive as well as negative. But awareness doesn't take away the continual struggle for many to adjust to what the new normal is offering.

My institute, the Sisters of St Louis, is still adjusting to these new ways of living and doing things. Our institute is international and our sisters minister in both the Global North and Global South. One of the changes that was most outstanding for us was travel. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, our sisters traveled a lot to meetings and workshops in different parts of the world. Since COVID, this has changed dramatically. Zoom and other social media vehicles are now used, even though these also have limitations.

A recent example was an educational workshop on safeguarding that was organized for our institute. Instead of traveling either to countries in the Global North or South, we began participating through Zoom meetings. This new kind of journeying has proved to be fun and interesting. Another positive is that we are now able to meet many sisters who would not have been able to travel elsewhere. Many more sisters can now benefit from educational programs than the few who were chosen to travel to a particular part of the world.

On July 3, 15 sisters of the institute from Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana and Nigeria were selected to begin their journey towards becoming safeguarders. The facilitator, St. Louis Sr. Theresa Olaniyan from Nigeria Province, was very amiable, diligent, smart, creative, interesting and knowledgeable. She is the coordinator of Child Protection and Vulnerable Adult Safeguarding for Nigeria Province.

The three-month online program took place every Wednesday and Sunday, and we participants were trained in understanding different forms of abuse, how it could be identified and prevented, how to deal with abuse cases and how to liaise with the church, NGOs and other faith bodies, traditional rulers, the community and other stakeholders.

The participants were encouraged to be the voice of the voiceless and vulnerable in the places they work, not just places limited to their apostolates. The goal is to help educate more people on the dangers of child abuse and together, with all stakeholders, work to combat this evil that is destroying individual lives and stealing

joy from families. The program ended in September with an interesting and beautiful online evening graduation.

The sisters dressed in different graduation caps and beautiful dresses. I was privileged to lead the opening prayer, and congratulatory messages were given by our trainer, Sister Theresa, who then presented us with certificates verifying that we had been through safeguarding training. Sr. Ann Concannon, one of our leaders from the central leadership team, was also present and congratulated us and gave the final blessing.

Following this graduation, 15 graduates were selected to become trainers of trainers. In December, we participated in a two-week online program, organized by the Central Leadership Team. This program was facilitated by consultants Cathy Doren from Ireland and Sister Theresa from Nigeria.

Six online sessions of two hours each were followed by individual and group assignments and participation in a dedicated WhatsApp group. The workshops were full of practical activities that made them fun.

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One of the most challenging but fun things we did was to use the mentimeter app, an interactive presentation software from Sweden. I had never heard of such a thing. Using the app, we were taught how to design interactive programs, engaging audiences using live polls, word clouds, quizzes, multiple-choice questions and so many other things. We also learned how to design and prepare slides for presentations on this app. It was a "learning by doing" workshop and required a lot of practice, but working in groups helped us a lot.

Towards the end of all the practicing, we each had to prepare a program using the mentimeter app. Seeing one another struggle with technology proved to be both funny and helpful. We all learned many new skills through our struggles. Cathy and Theresa were wonderful guides.

Remember, all of this education was done by Zoom, so we encountered technology challenges, too. Some of us struggled a lot with networks that were very poor, and, at times, some could not be connected at all. In the midst of the challenges, what impressed me very much was the zeal of the participants. It was amazing. Sisters

were determined to learn, no matter how many mistakes they might make. We made it fun, and every individual contributed immensely to its success.

Our challenge now is commitment to keep using what we have learned so that we do not lose those new skills.

In thinking back on those first weeks of COVID and the huge negatives it brought to many of us, I realize it miraculously pushed us into a new world of how connected we all are, even when at a distance. We can only thank God for using this negative to open our eyes, ears and hearts to creating a new normal.