

Out of Africa

Ann Smith, RSCJ, gave the interview below while visiting St. Louis in June. She was on a home visit from the Society's Uganda/Kenya Province, where she has lived for the past twelve years.

Where do you live?

I live in Ggaba (a section of Kampala) in the hospitality house of our province. It's a wonderful house on diocesan land in a compound with two major seminaries and other religious houses. Our house can sleep thirteen or so. People come from all over the province for meetings, to take care of official business – all the government ministries are in Kampala – or to buy supplies. Sometimes we have three guests, sometimes fifteen. In Africa, all that matters is that you have a roof and open arms of welcome.

What changes have you seen since you arrived?

I am one of the newcomers to the province. Our founders came from England, Ireland and Australia – mostly Ireland. If you look at the pictures of the province today, you see wonderful changes. Now most of the faces are African. Also, Africa is the fastest growing market in the world for technology. It is amazing to me that so many Africans, even in the bush, have cell phones.

How did you end up in Africa?

I had signed up to enter the Maryknoll Missionaries after college at Barat. Then I saw a poster and realized for the first time that the Society is international. I joined the Society and finally, while I was working as campus minister at 91st Street (Convent of the



Sister Smith prepares to open boxes of used computers shipped to Africa.

Sacred Heart, New York City) I thought that if I didn't fulfill this long-held wish to work overseas, my tombstone would say, "She always wanted to go, but" I went to Africa for a summer in 1991, knowing full well it would be a dangerous journey because I wouldn't want to come back. I went for good in 1994.

What work have you done in Africa?

Wherever I've been, I have always been kind of an "odd job" person. For the past six years, I have been the provincial secretary and have taught theology and computers at the two major seminaries. I am a teacher at heart, and could not imagine just talking to computers and telephones all day. There are 350 students in the two seminaries. One is an eight-year program for delayed vocations, where the students are bricklayers, carpenters, veterinarians, teachers, and come with many different levels of education. The other seminary is a more traditional

four-year theologate. Before that, I was the bursar and even acting headmistress at our secondary school in Kalungu. I assisted at the noviceship near Jinja, where I dubbed myself "senior novice."

What are some of the things you have learned while living overseas?

When you go to a new place, you wake up sleeping parts of yourself. And if you go to live in a new culture, you become like a baby, even if you are older – I was in my 50s when I went to live in Africa. I made a decision when I first arrived that I would suspend all of my opinions and judgements and just learn all I could. One of the things I have learned firsthand is that Americans are problem solvers, and it has been fun for me to use limited space creatively – to make use of what is there, but also to be prepared to use technology as soon as it is available. My father was in merchandising, and he used to say that when a department had everything it needed, the people weren't quite as creative as when they had a little less.

What are some of the problems of living in Africa?

Whether in the cities or villages, people are buried on a scale that boggles my mind. Many who die are younger people and children. With children sickness can turn bad very quickly. Another challenge right now is the daily power cuts. But I can't paint a negative picture. It is beautiful there. The people and climate are wonderful. Even the rainy season is a joy because I know drought is bad for the people and the rain will make everything lush and green. ✦