

## ***MSA Service in West Virginia 1974 - 2016***

In the spring of 1974 at the meeting of the Regional Council, the members of the MSA discussed the need for branching out beyond the confines of Holy Apostles Seminary for other apostolic work for the members. It was thought that the Society should focus on apostolates that would be appropriate for members returning from mission work in Latin America, work that would fit in with our charism, one part of which was ministry in poor parishes. Overtures in the past had been made to secure a parish in the New York area, but bishops were reluctant to pass over their own men to give a parish to a religious society. West Virginia was suggested as a possibility.

Accordingly Father Richard Hite wrote to Most Rev. Joseph Hodges, the Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston about the possibility of pastoral work in the diocese. A cordial response was received and a meeting was set up for March 22, 1974 to discuss the possibilities.

Father Hite spent a weekend in the diocese and assisted by Father John McDonnell went on a tour of several counties in the eastern part of the diocese. He pointed out that West Virginia had a Catholic population of 97,098 out of a total population of 2,093,583. It was made clear that a great many of the people were completely "unchurched" and so work was not confined to the "saved." West Virginia was in a real sense a mission territory. For this reason the priest working in the area had to have a great vent for his pastoral creativity. As in Peru there was work to be done, but how it was to be done was not as determined as in a big city parish of the east coast where structures have been fixed for generations. At the conclusion of his visit to West Virginia, Father Hite gave the bishop a short resume of the Society and its work and left him with a copy of the Society's Constitution, Community Life, and Evangelical Counsels.

At a meeting of the Regional Council in Washington two weeks later Father Hite gave a full report of the time spent in West Virginia. The Council's reaction was very positive, certainly less neutral than they appeared previously. It was decided to send a letter to each member here in the United States, briefing them on the trip and the opportunities for work in West Virginia. At the annual retreat at the end of May the Council would hear the questions and reactions. The Regional Animator would then make the next moves.

Having received a positive response from the members of the Society and the bishop, in September the Regional Animator, Fr. Isaac Raney and Father Hite went back to West Virginia to explore the possibilities of possible parishes for four days. It seemed likely that the town of Petersburg in Grant County would be the parish chosen. Father Hite was chosen to be the new pastor and since he was also the Director of Novices there would be a number of men coming with him in the following year. Therefore a place large enough for a House of Formation and a Rectory would have to be selected. In addition Brother Stephen King, MSA, a more recent member of the Society and old enough to be a grandfather, asked that he might be a part of the new undertaking. The date of September, 1975 was established to take over as Pastor in St. Mary's Church in Petersburg, West Virginia. There was no rectory but the two story parish center could serve as rectory and center until something larger could be found.

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Meanwhile with the shortage of priests in the area Bishop Hodges requested that Father Hite might take over weekend ministry in the town earlier than agreed. Father Hite, who was at the time the animator of the House of Studies in Washington D.C., agreed to serve as weekend priest starting in December 1974. This would permit him to explore the area and get to know the people as well as find a suitable dwelling place for at least eight people before settling permanently in the town.

Various students at the House of Studies accompanied Father Hite on weekends to experience ministry in rural America. The first weekend was a warm autumn day at the start but come Sunday the snow was falling in abundance and on the return trip to Washington D.C. the car with no heater ended in a ditch, but a kind West Virginia man with snow tires and a chain pulled the cold priest up the mountain to a spot which allowed them to return safely to Washington. This was a good omen of things to come.

During the many months between December 1974 and September 1975 Fr. Hite and his seminarians experience the great gratitude of the people of the parish. This was the first resident parish priest to settle in town since Catholics had been living in the area. The people had built their Church many years before up in the hills near Kessel, West Virginia on Possum Holler Road. There too they had buried their dead and had pot luck suppers on Sunday after Mass. By 1972 the Catholic population was centered in Petersburg so the church was moved to accommodate them. With evident enthusiasm they helped find a place for the new pastor and seminarians. A large farm house about 3 miles out of town near Dorcas on Durgon Road was found. The owner, Mrs. Madeline Shobe, a widow, was willing to rent the house for one year, furnished. Brother Steve King and Father Hite moved in August 1975 and the 6 novices arrived toward the end of September. St. Mary's Parish which never had a resident priest now had an "invasion" - 6 seminarians, one Brother and one priest. The enthusiasm of the team definitely established a Catholic presence in the town, not just in the parish. Father Hite previously had visited all the Protestant ministers and their wives to diminish a possible anti-Catholic bias, not uncommon in rural West Virginia. The novices and Brother Steve gave a very welcome and exciting spirit to the foundation.

The parish consisted of about 130 people from three counties of Grant, Hardy and Pendleton; soon a mission church would be set up in Franklin a lovely town in Pendleton County to the south where the Lutheran Church allowed them to rent their place on Sunday night. Ironically the first mass was celebrated there was on Reformation Sunday.

The eager novices took to gardening, taking turns cooking, setting up an AA meeting at the parish center and helping with CCD instruction and youth ministry. Half the time was spent in discussions with the novices and the other in parish work where the novices went in pairs to many of the homes outside of town searching for former Catholics. They were always given a warm reception by the locals who welcomed visits from the young men eager to be of help.

After Christmas, the novices were sent out to intern at various ministries throughout the state. Two were sent to prison ministry in Moundsville Prison, one was sent to work under one of the most experienced priests in the southern part of the state, one left the novitiate, one worked at an outreach

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center in the coalmining district, and one stayed to work in the parish in Petersburg. At the end of the formation program in May, five novices made their first Promises in the Society.

In June of 1976 Father Hite asked to be relieved as director of novices, feeling that more attention should be given to parish ministry where his inexperience in that area needed greater emphasis. Therefore the novices were placed under the direction of Father Raney in Cromwell, CT. Meanwhile some mobile homes were sent from Connecticut and set up as housing for the rectory in Petersburg and a second one in Franklin to serve as a mission station from Petersburg with Father Hite and Brother Steve in charge.

Over the years various seminarians would drive to West Virginia to help out either on weekends or for longer periods of time during the year. Father Hite continued to learn more about rural parish life by attending a two week seminar for clergy working in Appalachia that was given by professors from West Virginia University in Morgantown.

In the fall of 1976 the novitiate was placed under the direction of Father Addison (Tad) Hallock and moved back to West Virginia where the community of 6 was housed in a new rectory and the mobile home adjacent to the Church. Eventually the diocese purchased a home in Moorefield where the novices might live. On weekends they attended Mass in Petersburg and continued to have community with the MSA there after liturgy and at other times during the week. Father Tad continued as novice director for several years until 1981. Among the novices in those years were Joe Cizdziel, Ed Reiter, Leonard Fitzpatrick, Bob McQueeney, Frank Fagella, Jerry Petta, Bob Whitton, Mike Bailey and others. In 1981 the Society decided to move the novitiate back to Connecticut. The time in West Virginia had been fruitful for the men in the novitiate some of who called it the best experience of community life in their MSA experience.

In another part of West Virginia Father Harry Dunn began to serve at Fr. Francis Xavier Parish in Moundsville. Father Dunn had helped out as a seminarian from time to time in Petersburg where his outgoing nature brought him into contact with many people. Over the years from 1979 until now he had ample experience in many parishes in the state, most of which were in difficult locations such as Sacred Heart Parish in Williamson, deep in Hatfield-McCoy country. Father Dunn is now retired and living in retirement at the diocesan retirement apartments for religious in Wheeling.

In 1981 Father George Jepsen returned from Sao Paulo, Brazil where he had been working as part of the founding community of the MSA in that country. He initially lived with Brother Steve and Father Hite but was then directed to take over the new Epiphany parish in Moorefield not far from Petersburg which until then had been part of the Petersburg parish. Eventually a new church was built about a mile out of town and when the novices moved to Connecticut their house became the rectory. Father Jepsen was a faithful pastor but after some time he felt called to return to his work in Brazil and so in 1983 he returned to that country. He just celebrated his 51 ordination anniversary in the Brazilian parish where he lives as pastor emeritus.

Brother Steve King remained as a faithful associate at St. Mary's in Petersburg. He felt the weight of years and decided to return to Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Connecticut for his final

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years. Much loved and respected by the people of the parish and the town he was given a festive sendoff in August of 1980. He died in 1999 at the age of 93.

In 1980 Father Hite received permission from the Society to pursue his vocation as a hermit. There was some delay in leaving the parish of St. Mary in Petersburg. A replacement for Fr. Hite had to be found since the Society had a contract with the diocese to pastor the parish. Eventually Father Thomas Simon was called from his assignment in Peru to take over the area. Father Hite remained for a few weeks to help Father Tom get situated since he had never been pastor of a parish. However he had spent a year as deacon in St. Joseph's Parish in Martinsburg, WV, a much larger urban parish where he was well liked for his hospital visitation to many. He began his duties as pastor of the Petersburg parish in October of 1981. He was not unfamiliar with the people since he had visited the area as a seminarian several times.

One of Father Tom's gifts was that he could fix anything, having received a degree in engineering in his early years. The degree came in handy when the need for a new parish center was called for. The old two story building on Grant Street was no longer adequate and so it was eventually torn down and a new parish center was constructed behind the church which took up much of his time and energy.

In 1992 the parish of Our Lady of Grace in Romney was without a pastor and Father Joseph Kenny was assigned there but without contract in contrast to the Petersburg parish. Deacon Martin Rooney served there with Father Kenney. Fr. Kenney's term only lasted until December when Father Jose Salazar took over as pastor. Father Rooney was ordained a priest at the parish on June 12, 1993 by Bishop Bernard Schmitt. Father Salazar remained in Romney until 1998. Father Rooney departed after Father Salazar and thereafter the MSA discontinued a presence in Romney.

After 1999 the MSA no longer pastored Petersburg, Franklin or Moorefield as members and the Society felt called to serve in other areas of the vineyard. Father Hite and Father Dunn were the only members of the Society left in the state. Fr. Hite remained in the hermitage near Purgitsville until 2016 when he moved to live with the Little Sisters of the Poor in Washington D.C. this ended the MSA service to the people of West Virginia.