

CATHOLIC + SAN FRANCISCO

Newspaper of the Archdiocese of San Francisco

www.catholic-sf.org

SERVING SAN FRANCISCO, MARIN & SAN MATEO COUNTIES

MAY 12, 2016

\$1.00 | VOL. 18 NO. 12



(COURTESY PHOTO)

Retired nurse Angela Testani accepts a gift of coconuts after providing health care to patients in the Diocese of Abakaliki, Nigeria.

Retired nurse, priest team up for health care in Nigerian village

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CATHOLIC SAN FRANCISCO

A retired Catholic nurse and a Nigerian pastor are teaming up to improve basic health care services in the priest's rural diocese where people suffer because of a lack of quality, accessible care and basic health education.

Angela Testani of Holy Name of Jesus Parish in San Francisco returned from an April trip to the Diocese of Abakaliki, Nigeria, to visit Father Edward Inyanwachi, pastor of St. Patrick Parish.

Father Inyanwachi is well-known

in the Archdiocese of San Francisco, having served at a number of local parishes for more than a decade while he pursued his doctorate in Catholic educational leadership at the University of San Francisco. He returned to his native diocese in 2013 to take leadership of a newly formed parish.

"Father Ed," as Testani calls him, is now the pastor of a largely rural parish in Ebonyi state in southeast Nigeria that includes St. Patrick Parish and two mission churches. Parish families, most of whom farm yams and other sustaining crops, walk miles on dirt roads carrying

their own chairs to arrive for a dawn Mass before they set out for the fields. Testani described witnessing a "humbling" liturgy that combined Catholic and native traditions and "lasted no less than two-and-a-half hours."

In what Testani called a pastoral-mercy partnership, she and Father Inyanwachi are working together to raise the money to ship a container of refurbished medical equipment to the local Catholic hospital later this year. The pair will seek to raise the \$25,000

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needed in a series of fundraisers this August when the Nigerian priest comes for a summer visit.

Testani, who retired from nursing at Mt. Zion Hospital in San Francisco in 2012, had been making annual shipments of basic medical supplies to Father Inyanwachi but said she felt "called to do more" since returning from an independent humanitarian nursing mission in Sudan in 2007. She told Father Inyanwachi that she would like to come to his parish, survey the state of health care in the region and assess the obstacles to improving it. He agreed.

Early in her visit the priest introduced her as a visiting nurse from America during Mass. When she walked out the door, she found 16 people lined up to see her.

During her 10-day trip Testani learned that a combination of poverty, poor nutrition, native superstitions and inadequate health care cause suffering, illness and death for villagers of all ages. The average lifespan is 60.

"In this diocese, people think you go to the hospital to die," she said. An ambulance is nothing short of a hearsay, she said, so Father Inyanwachi is the de facto ambulance driver for those who do go to the local Catholic health center, Mater Misericordiae Hospital. The hospital has an excellent nursing program but operates with barely basic medical equipment.



Father Edward Inyanwachi

More commonly used for regular health care are isolated, unregulated dispensaries run by inadequately trained people who often can't and don't properly diagnose or treat a patient, Testani said.

During her visit Testani met with a Catholic women's group and listened to their concerns and questions. She also talked to them about health from the perspective of body, mind and soul.

"There is no way I would address anyone about their health without asking about all those things," she said. "I didn't want to be seen as an American trying to impose my ideas on them."

She talked to the women about stress, nutrition and rest and learned that no one had ever told them about basic self-care. She said she was humbled by one woman who asked her: "Who am I that you should even want to listen to me?"

"I said to her, 'You are I are children of God, no more, no less,'" Testani said.

Testani's long-term goal is to provide a traveling medical van staffed by the nurses at Mater Misericordiae and to empower local women.

In an email to Catholic San Francisco, Father Inyanwachi said, "My hope is that this collaborative work with Angela will provide an opportunity for an outreach in the proclamation of the good news. It will serve as a way in which the church in San Francisco will bear witness to the love of Christ toward our brothers and sisters in the Diocese of Abakaliki.

"It is my hope that in the long term it will lead to a solid partnership and friendship not only between a San Francisco parishioner and a Nigerian pastor to improve health care, but also between the church in San Francisco and in Abakaliki in areas of evangelization, catechesis, education and health care."