

between members of different faiths.

Having seen this approach succeed in Madison, Abiri is determined to use similar tactics—along with her professional experience—to change the harmful stigmas surrounding mental illness in Nigeria. She has a master's degree in public health from UW-Madison and is a psychiatric nurse at St. Mary's Hospital. Internships at Journey Mental Health Services showed her the comprehensive support network available to patients and their families in Madison, and she realizes Nigeria lacks such infrastructure.

To get her project started, Abiri is applying for a World Health Organization grant to provide initial financial support for a team of public health professionals' travel to Nigeria. The team would launch a wellness initiative to educate citizens about psychiatric and psychological disorders and to improve access to the latest pharmaceuticals. On a macro level, this work aims to reshape national policy regarding long-term mental health care and community support systems.

Harmful stigmas regarding psychological conditions perpetuate from generation to generation in Nigeria, Abiri notes. Families hide relatives exhibiting signs of mental illness from their communities as long as possible. Then, with the country's deep-rooted tribal heritage, the first—and sometimes only—line of treatment is via traditional "healers." These practitioners focus on expunging demonic influences, witchcraft or past "sins" believed to cause mental health issues, creating significant barriers to proper diagnosis and treatment.

Abiri believes members of Nigeria's dominant religions, Islam and Christianity, could help educate their communities about current research and standards in mental health treatment. They could help debunk the superstitious beliefs of the past, which feed the negative ideas and emotions surrounding mental health issues in Nigeria.

She also hypothesizes that aware Christians and Muslims will be more supportive of those suffering from mental illnesses. This education and support could have an enormous influence on a psychiatric patient's sense of self and the measure of value that individual's life holds in Nigeria today.

Abiri believes that, between health professionals and faith-based community efforts, her project can help transform mental health treatment in Nigeria. ■

Q&A

Answering the Call

A commitment to inclusivity and a respect for the earth help define Sister Mary David Walgenbach and Holy Wisdom Monastery

By Devin Ross

When did you recognize your calling to religious life?

I became aware of my dream to become a nun when I was in high school. I attended a Catholic grade school and a public high school in a small rural town in Iowa. The town had six hundred residents and four churches. At the public school, every day the teachers took turns reading from the Bible, which was followed by the students' recitation of the Lord's Prayer. There was a strong expectation that the children of Hospers, Iowa, would continue the tradition of supporting the school and attending church on Sunday.

What is your favorite thing about being prioress at Holy Wisdom Monastery?

The prioress is chosen by the community members to be their leader. My favorite thing about being prioress is participating in the human development of each sister and basking in the awareness of how much can be accomplished together. As leader, I am also able to have a voice in the ministries of the monastery and work with many dedicated and committed people who call the monastery their spiritual home.

The monastery offers Sunday Assembly as opposed to traditional Mass. What is the service like?

Sunday Assembly, an ecumenical community of women, men and children, meets on Sunday for worship at 9 a.m. The worship service is liturgical with a distinct liturgy of the word and Eucharist. We have four ordained presiders and eleven women and men with theological education who give homilies. All are welcome at the table. Inclusivity is important to the sisters and to all who come to worship.

When and how did the decision to host LGBT ceremonies arise?

This arose in 2010 when we began to inform people that weddings could be celebrated at the monastery. We received inquiries about holding LGBT ceremonies here. We welcomed them.

You've attended a number of spiritual retreats across the globe. Where did your most inspiring interreligious gathering occur?

Yes, our community at Holy Wisdom hosted Benedictine sisters from China, Kenya, Brazil, Nigeria and South Korea. I had the opportunity to visit their communities. I will always cherish the experience of attending a Roman Catholic Mass at the parish church in Nigeria. It was packed with at least one thousand people. We had waited two hours before the priest arrived. The entrance procession began with young men playing the drums and carrying the sheaths of their clans followed by young women in magnificent dresses and head adornments also dancing and singing. Because it was harvest Sunday, men and women carried on their heads bright-colored plastic containers filled with the first fruits from their gardens and set them before the altar to be given to those in need. The Mass lasted two hours.

Holy Wisdom is very green, receiving Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design certification from the U.S. Green Building Council. Why is this a central part of your mission?

Holy Wisdom Monastery is a Platinum LEED Certified Building that expresses the sisters' belief that the divine is present in all creation and that humans must remain acutely aware of the web of interconnections among all that exists. A sense of responsibility for the well-being of the environment is embedded within the tenets of monastic life, creating a deep commitment to the earth and its state of being ... To this day, working and protecting the surrounding environment remains a core element of Benedictine spirituality. ■

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