Centers of Learning in Apopka, Florida
Dear Friends,

When you see advertisements on your computer screen, television, or in the newspaper, do you ever wonder, “How much is enough?”

The answer depends on where you live. Sister Judianne Beltz (Kenya) and Sister Marie-Jeanne Kuntonda (Democratic Republic of Congo) will tell you about the farms Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur operate to feed themselves and their students. For them, having enough begins with having enough to eat.

Sister Carol Shoup approaches the topic from a U.S. perspective as she directs “High Folly,” a spirituality center in Massachusetts. She models a way of living that respects earth’s resources, in the hope that there will be enough for all who share the planet.

Students at Notre Dame Seishin University, Okayama, Japan know they have more than enough and want to share their abundance. Since 1980, they have volunteered for two to three weeks at a home for disabled women in Ipoh, Malaysia. Sister Barbara-Jean Kubik can tell you all about it!

“Having enough” goes beyond material well-being. Sister Cathy Gorman and Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Apopka, Florida are helping farm workers gain not only material sufficiency, but education and the human rights many of us can take for granted.

For more than 200 years, co-workers like you have worked with us to bring “enough” to the people among whom we work. With your help, many have enough food, shelter, education – and an awareness of their human dignity. Because of you, they experience God’s goodness in a concrete way. Thank you.

In Notre Dame,

Camilla Burns, SND
Congregational Leader
St. Julie’s words “We exist only for the poor, only for the poor, absolutely only for the poor,” and “Let your hearts be as wide as the world,” have been the motivating forces of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur’s presence and ministry in Apopka, Florida for the past 37 years. The farm worker and immigrant communities opened their hearts and homes to the Sisters in the early days and now have found a home in the Apopka Family Learning Center and the Hope CommUnity Center.

Sister Catherine (Cathy) Gorman says “Our Hope CommUnity Center is a dream that has come true over a long period of time. With 37 years of fiestas, raffles, dances, and pledges the low-income community produced over $300,000, which, added to other money raised, enabled us to build a place where the poor would feel welcome and receive education for life.”

Local communities of farm workers and immigrants who helped raise a percentage of the finances needed for the centers, participate in the programs offered. Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur Catherine Gorman, Gail Grimes, Ann Kendrick, Maureen White, Teresa McElwee, Barbara Boyle, multi-ethnic and multi-racial staff, Notre Dame AmeriCorps members, and community volunteers make up the staff.

While this wonderful work is happening in Apopka’s north end center, nestled in South Apopka is the Apopka Family Learning Center, which the Justice and Peace Office, Inc. created. Through training and support services for children and adults, the office and its subsidiary projects help families address issues of housing, literacy, child care, health care, parenting skills and money management.
“Kids in Motion,” the after-school academic enrichment program created in 1995, improves the quality of education for minority children between the ages of 5 and 10 by tutoring 80 children in reading, writing and mathematics. Staff members also encourage these children and their parents to develop mentoring relationships.

During graduation ceremonies, fifth graders spoke from the heart: “I feel that I am wanted here and this feeling has helped me pay better attention in school,” said Alex. “Kids in Motion has also helped my family to understand me better. It is hard for my parents to help me with homework because they don’t speak English, but they get help at the center. I have also learned to behave better and respect others around me.”

Francisco, another student, commented, “I made good friends during the two years I was in Kids in Motion. It helped me and my family. Otherwise my brother and I would have had to stay at home alone. My mother didn’t want that ‘cause it is too dangerous.”

These centers of learning put into practice the call of Françoise Blin de Bourdon, our co-foundress, that “we gather the poor and nurture them.”

“We came here with the idea that we were going to be evangelizers,” says Sister Cathy. “It turned out that the evangelization was mutual.”
FARMING IN MALAVA

by Sister Judianne Beltz, SNDdeN

At Malava in Western Kenya, we have 10 acres of former pasture land. The soil is lacking in organic matter and dries out quickly after rain. When we came to develop the property in 1996, we found that the former owner had cut down all the trees, so our first undertaking was to plant trees, including a windbreak of cypress, a type of eucalyptus that grows again when cut, fast-growing grevillea, and calliandra, which is good cattle fodder.

We are now farming 2 1/2 acres, on half-acre plots with 10-foot strips of grass between them to prevent erosion, as the land slopes gently. Two plots of maize and beans planted together, as is the custom here, are rotated with a plot of ground nuts (peanuts) to put nitrogen back into the soil. Another plot has napier grass to supplement pasture grass for the cows, and the fifth has a variety of indigenous trees with various uses, as well as a few oil palms, which the government is encouraging farmers here to grow as a cash crop. (I like the idea of the fruit being harvested rather than the tree!) Elsewhere there are bananas, passion fruit vines, and fruit tree seedlings. We also have a large vegetable garden behind the postulant house, and a smaller one near the community house.

We have been trying gradually to farm more “organically” and to use sustainable methods. Only the first plowing of the pasture land was done by tractor, which compacts the soil; since then, oxen have plowed, and harrowing has been done with hoes.

We had been using chemical fertilizers, though sparingly, until the last few years. Tithonia, a common shrub, is a very good “green manure,” but there was not one plant on our property, though it grows in proliferation by the roadside. I first planted cuttings around the vegetable gardens and two years ago began to “alley crop” it in the plots: five rows of maize and beans or ground nuts between rows of tithonia. This is cut regularly and the branches scattered in the plots and garden beds, where they decompose very quickly.

Besides acting as fertilizer, the tithonia adds organic matter. This year we also added rotted bagasse, the shredded remains of cane from the first step in sugar processing, to the garden beds, as it retains moisture well. Next year we may mulch the beds with it.

…planning, measuring, planting and weeding, combined with prayer!
Another by-product of sugar processing is filter mud, a sludge we buy to fertilize the maize, beans and groundnuts. In the garden and for the trees and napier grass we use manure from the few cows and sheep. Also, there is a slurry pit next to the animal shed where urine from the cows collects. It can be diluted with water to fertilize garden plants.

The ubiquitous moles are kept from the garden by a ring of tephrosia plants, and harmful insects are combated with spray made with hot pepper, pyrethrum, or neem tree leaves. Marigolds planted among the vegetables ward off root nematodes.

I have read about the many ways that plowing is not good for the soil, especially if done when it is too wet or dry, which are usually the only options here. This year, I have tried a small experiment with a no-till method called Farming God's Way (FGW), which was developed to help subsistence farmers increase their yield beyond their needs so they can sell the excess. It uses mulching and strict procedures of planning, measuring, planting and weeding, combined with prayer! The plots can be prepared before the rainy season, so planting can begin as soon as rain arrives. If it is successful, we will plant at least one entire field this way next season, and we will have a small demonstration plot at St. Julie Centre for Disabled Children as well, to show the parents.

To keep at least some parts of the vegetable gardens producing in dry seasons, we rely on rainwater from the roof run-off of three buildings, stored in six large plastic tanks, so we try to use it carefully. Squash, pumpkin and cucumbers are planted around half-buried five-litre containers with small holes drilled near the bottom, so that when they are filled, the water seeps slowly into the soil near the roots. I am also trying “deep-pipe irrigation,” which is simpler and less expensive than drip irrigation, though more labor-intensive. One-foot sections of PVC pipe with small holes drilled down one side and two inches apart are buried upright, with the holes facing the plant. Each pipe section is filled with water twice. We have even had some pepper plants that lasted three years, though that is rare.

The planting, nurturing and harvesting continue as we harmonize our work with the fertility of God's good creation.
Our heritage: the lands of our missions in the Congo

By Sister Marie-Jeanne Kuntonda, SNDdeN

The Congo Province of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur consists of 16 communities, 12 of which have extensive grounds. Education, care of the sick, and pastoral work are some of the principal full-time activities. Agriculture and the raising of large and small livestock remain important for consumption in the present life of the Sisters.

Currently, a dozen communities have the space for fields of manioc, gardens of vegetables and other local products. They also grow peanuts, beans, peppers, tomatoes, varieties of legumes and potatoes, and different fruit trees.

In the region of Kwango/Bandundu and that of Bas-Congo, we have a farm of large cattle. These two farms offer beef for these communities.

In addition, these communities raise a variety of domestic animals in order to have enough food. There are pigs, goats, hens, pigeons, rabbits, turkeys, etc.

Our orchards and farms help to ensure that the Sisters are adequately nourished. Our staple food is manioc, prepared in a variety of ways. We buy whatever we are unable to raise ourselves.

To make the best use of space, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur layer peanuts (ground level) and beans (standing) in their garden at Kimwenza, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Continued
The communities of Kinshasa, the capital city, do not have space for gardens or the raising of livestock, so they have to buy their food. The communities of the interior share fruit with those of Kinshasa and Kimwenza, another large city. The Sisters at Kimwenza are the purchasers and suppliers for the province.

We ask local farmers and our colleagues for help in carrying out our outreach work. In the future, we hope to be able to procure equipment that will allow us to farm large areas and thus help destitute farmers.

A Congolese postulant with the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur tends the Sisters' garden at Kimwenza, Democratic Republic of Congo.
‘Resting in Grace’ at High Folly
by Sister Carol Shoup, SNDdeN

“When despair for the world grows in me…
I rest in the grace of the world…”

High Folly is a small retreat center in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts. Its 400-plus acres are located within a wider green “corridor” of thick forests, rivers and streams, lakes and meadows, home to a wide variety of plants and animals. The property belongs to the Stigmatine Fathers of Boston. For over 20 years up to the present High Folly has welcomed guests for retreats and gatherings. Indeed, when “despair grows” or busy lives grow tired, here is a place where one can “rest in the grace” of the natural world.

I first came to High Folly over 10 years ago when I began teaching theology at St. Mary High School in the nearby city of Westfield, Massachusetts. My hope was twofold: to incorporate into my teaching the importance of seeing nature as sacred and living close to nature as well. High Folly provided the opportunity to do just that, not only by its location, but also as an educational venue for sharing ecology and spirituality.

Visitors who come will often remark, “It is so quiet here! No sirens, no traffic!”

On one of her visits to High Folly, friend and Sister, Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN, planted a little walnut tree. It stood about a foot high in 2001. Today it is over 10 feet tall. It is a testament to her strength and especially her hope of a just and sustainable future. When I visit the tree I ask Dot to help me, our Sisters, our colleagues, families and friends to do our part to make that future possible!

Brazilian martyr Sister Dorothy Stang planted the tree under which Sister Carol Shoup is standing.
Saki Hiramatsu, a 2008 graduate of Notre Dame Seishin University, Okayama, Japan spent the summer break of her junior year as an International Peace Intern in Cambodia with the Japan Lay Missionary Movement. She and other volunteers worked with people who live near a garbage dump and make their living by exchanging the recyclable trash for money. There are about 500 trash collectors, including adults and children. She writes, “Spending time with those children gave me a chance to take a hard look at my daily life. They taught me that common things, – going to schools, wearing clothes, eating heartily – are very special and should give a feeling of gratitude.”

Saki is one of many of the university’s students who share the goodness they have experienced at this university operated by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. In 1980 its president, Sister St. John Watanabe, established the “Malaysia Volunteer Group.” Students volunteer for two to three weeks at a home for disabled women in Ipoh, Malaysia. They have helped the women make potholders, aprons, bags, teddy bears and other useful and practical items for sale, as well as working with the home’s Merry Gold activity group. One of the goals is to help the women develop skills for supporting themselves.
Our Mission

Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur making known God’s goodness… educating for life.
Sisters of Notre Dame, women with hearts as wide as the world, make known God’s goodness and love of the poor through a Gospel way of life, community and prayer.
Continuing a strong educational tradition, we take our stand with poor people, especially women and children, in the most abandoned places.
Each of us commits her one and only life to work with others to create justice and peace for all.

Africa
Democratic Republic of Congo
Congo Brazzaville
Kenya
Nigeria
South Africa
Zimbabwe

Latin America
Brazil
Mexico
Nicaragua
Peru

Asia
Japan

Europe
Belgium
France
Italy
United Kingdom

North America
United States
(29 states and the District of Columbia)