

Kansas farmers mentor farmers in Africa

By Karen Bonar
The Register

FARMERS AND RANCHERS IN THE SALINA Diocese are plowing the way on a new pilot project, connecting U.S. farmers to those in Africa.

The project, Missio Invest Farm Mentorship Program, is the brainchild and a collaboration between Father Steve Heina and Missio Invest, which was founded by the National Office of The Pontifical Mission Societies.

"This is a form of stewardship for our farmers," said Father Heina, who is the director of the propagation of the faith office at the Salina Diocese. "I believe our Kansas farmers are some of the best, most talented, most dedicated in the world. There's something significant to anyone to being able to be a steward of a great gift. Part of stewardship is sharing gifts in love and justice with others."

WHEN DAMAR-AREA FARMER TOM BENOIT heard about the pilot program via his pastor, Father Henry Saw Lone, he jumped at the chance.

Benoit assumed responsibility for his family's 200-head dairy at age 21 and ran the program until 2004, when his children moved away to college and adulthood. At that time, he transitioned to hay, corn, milo and wheat on about 11,000 acres.

He is paired with Father Mark Kitili, who farms about 80 acres in Kenya.

"It's a good fit with Father Mark, because he puts up a lot of hay," Benoit said.

As a dairy farmer for most of his life, Benoit was involved with the Land O'Lakes corporate board. As part of the board, he traveled to Rwanda and South Africa to visit the organization's mentoring program for dairy farmers. When the opportunity arose to become a peer mentor for an African farmer from the comfort of his own combine, Benoit said he jumped at the chance.

"I fell in love with Africa. I got involved with the Land O'Lakes board, which is huge helping people in Africa, so to me this is a natural fit for what I've been doing," he said. "It's not about wealth for Father Mark. He's doing it so he can help others. He uses the money from the farm for the church, school and to help the locals."

The duo communicate primarily through a smartphone app called WhatsApp, which permits text messaging, photo sharing and audio or video calls.

"Father Mark has a passion for farming. He puts his heart and soul in it," Benoit said. "He will send me a fast WhatsApp and say, 'I got six bags of beans done today.' He's upbeat and excited."

In addition to talking about the daily tasks of farming, he said, they are developing a friendship.

"He knows I have a daughter getting married soon, and he is always asking about her and wants to know about our family," Benoit said.

And Benoit said he hopes some of his professional connections can assist Father Kitili on the farm.

"I'm trying to get a company in there and get him started with soil samples," he said. "I think, through Land O'Lakes, they can help him. Then we can get deeper into fertilizer and chemicals that could help his crops."

THE IDEA TO PAIR KANSAS FARMERS WITH those in Africa took several years to develop. First, Father Heina enlisted the help of Tom Murphy, who retired after working in the agriculture industry for more than 30 years, was concluding his tenure as the president of the Rural Life Commission for the Salina Diocese.

"We can't relate to them about tractors, but



Women hand-shuck corn in Zambia. Through the Missio Invest Farm Mentorship Program, Kansas farmers and ranchers connect with those running agricultural operations in Africa.

we can talk about population of plants, the fields, rainfall and when to plant and what to plant," Murphy said, "but we have to be cognizant of the fact that they have no mechanization at all."

Murphy worked with Father Heina to develop the outline for the pilot program, and once approved by the Missio Invest board, began the process of implementing their plans.

While he was initially nervous about the cultural differences, they were able to find common ground.

"We're developing a relationship (with the farmers in Africa) and seeing what comes from it," Murphy said. "I was nervous to show them pictures of how we do things here, knowing some of their machines are similar to those our ancestors used."

Father Andrew Small, OMI, is the president and CEO of Missio Invest. He said the organic way this project developed is exciting.

"The Church's global presence really comes alive when different dioceses or parishes unite to put the Gospel into practice," he said. "Missio Invest encourages a spirit of enterprise and stewardship that allows farmers from the U.S. to share wisdom, experience and faith with those around the world and, we hope, vice versa. Everyone has something to contribute. We're excited to see this program grow and flourish."

JOEY AND MATT THIELEN FROM DORRANCE were recruited to work with Sister Mary Chilengwe, of the Sisters of Child Jesus, in the Archdiocese of Kasama in Zambia.

Sister Mary's congregation has care of three farms, totaling about 1,900 acres. The farms produce and sell eggs, chicken, fish, beef, goat meat and corn. The farm provides food and income for local schools, orphanages and communities, and hires many local laborers.

The introduction to the farm mentors were made in February, and Sister Mary said she has gleaned new ideas from her mentors. "Before, we had been using traditional means of farming," she said. "Now we are thinking of farming as a business, since we have seen farms from outside. It is an eye opener to me. I am learning a lot and trying to do some of these things at our farm."

As with Sister Mary, Benoit said Father Kitili has been analyzing the farming operation with more of a business mind lately. He utilized one of the Missio Invest loans to purchase a bigger tractor and bailer for his hay. "He did a financial plan of what he could



Joey Thielen plants cover crop for cattle grazing on Sept. 3 in Dorrance. "The biggest difference I see right now is they're threshing and harvesting totally by hand," he said of the religious sister who lives in Zambia who they are mentoring. "They have labor available there, and machinery is not available."



The Benoit family gathers in rural Damar during wheat harvest this summer. Tom Benoit, who farms about 11,000 acres, mentors Father Mark Kitili, who farms about 80 acres in Kenya.

do with the bigger tractor and bailer," Benoit said. "He realized he could bale his own crop faster and would have time to custom bale for other farmers."

JOEY THIELEN SAID IT'S BEEN INTERESTING connecting with farmers in different cultures.

"I know they're not going to be able to adapt everything that we do here, but there is some possibilities for improvements," he said. "The biggest difference I see right now is they're threshing and harvesting totally by hand. They have labor available there, and machinery is not available."

The other hurdle some of the counterparts in Africa faces is resources.

"They have a tractor, but they cannot afford the fuel, so they plow with their oxen," Murphy said. "But they found people in the village who will plow if they give them a share of the food."

One surprising development came about when Murphy was looking at the background of a picture Sister Mary sent via WhatsApp. Murphy asked her if they utilized the jackfruit trees he saw in the background, and she said no.

"I worked with a guy who is trying to mar-

ket jackfruit to third-world countries because they say one jackfruit tree can feed a family for a year," Murphy said. "It can be used to make flour and can be eaten in several other ways."

ANOTHER FRUIT OF THE MENTORING IS learning ways to improve efficiency. While not technically part of the program, Murphy said he was seeing photos of Sister Mary and those on the farm hand-shelling corn and hand-threshing beans.

"It reminded me of our ancestors," he said. "To watch these sit in a pile of corn and shuck and shell, it didn't make any sense to me. I said, 'Would you use a hand sheller?'"

Sister Mary enthusiastically agreed it would improve their farming operations. Yet, as Murphy explored options, shipping a sheller to Zambia was cost-prohibitive due to freight and import fees. As he and Sister Mary continued to converse, Murphy said he explored options such as an electric sheller.

"But they can't use electric because they never know when they'll have electricity," he said. "So we found a diesel one."

Murphy communicated with Missio Invest, and the organization agreed to add it to their



Sisters work at one of the three farms operated by the Sisters of Child Jesus, in the Archdiocese of Kasama in Zambia.

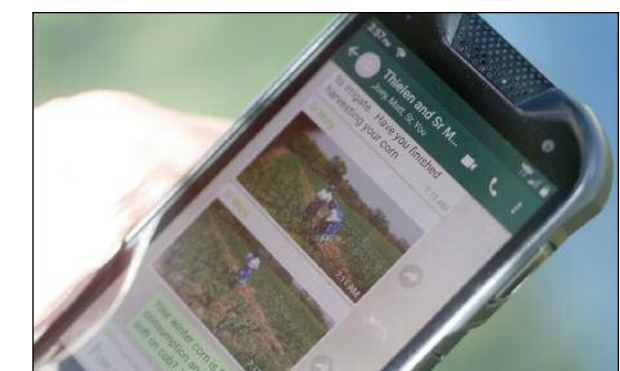
website as an option where those interested can invest and help fund a portion of the sheller for Sister Mary's farm.

THE MISSIO INVEST FARM MENTORSHIP Program evolved over time, said Father Heina. He first learned about Missio Invest several years ago. Once he heard about their efforts to assist church-run farms in Africa, he approached them with the idea of a U.S. to Africa farm-mentoring program.

"This is a brand-new program," he said. "We had to construct a mission statement and a job description for the mentors, trying to figure out what kind of information would be involved with the mentoring effort."

He and Murphy collaborated to draft a proposal, and once approved, the duo set out to recruit farmers and ranchers from the rural Salina Diocese. Once mentors were identified, they met in February for an orientation, and the project began.

"The goal is to share the basic, hands-on experience," Father Heina said. "It's also a matter of social justice that we have a responsibility in always as Church — spiritually,



The Kansas farmers who are mentoring farmers in Africa communicate via WhatsApp on their smartphones.

"We can't relate to them about tractors, but we can talk about population of plants, the fields, rainfall and when to plant and what to plant."

Tom Murphy
Salina Diocese
Rural Life Commission

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Farm mentoring program under Missio Invest umbrella

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materially and occupationally — to try to reach out to those in need.”

Because it is a pilot project, there have been a few hurdles to overcome.

“It took some time to get the contact link set up,” Father Heina said. “They have sometimes difficulty accessing the Internet.”

Joelle Birge, vice president of lending for Missio Invest, helped create a solution for communication.

“Our loan recipients have a phone with free data for WhatsApp, but they might not have email unless they go to town,” she said. “They can use WhatsApp every day on their farm. It took some time to establish that connection on WhatsApp, but now it seems to be working well.”

MISSIO INVEST BEGAN IN 2014-15 AS AN offshoot of the Pontifical Mission Society. The intention was to help leverage resources for the global Catholic church.

“The national office decided to start with Africa, where the Church owns a

lot of Church-owned land, including Church-owned farms,” Birge said, adding there are priests and sisters who oversee these properties. “The Society wanted to see if we can give those farms the resources they need to expand and become sources of food, jobs and training for their local communities, while also helping them to become profitable so they can create a sustainable income stream to support their social ministries.”

Since its inception, Missio Invest has grown from giving loans in one country to seven within Africa. It also funds 36 loans to agribusinesses, totaling nearly \$4 million in loans.

“This is a way to leverage the resources of the global Catholic Church to address food and security and poverty,” Birge said.

The first investment was in 2016 in Kenya, and over the next few years expanded to Uganda, Zambia, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania and Ghana, with expansion plans in Rwanda and Ethiopia.

Yet, she said, the support is not limited to the finan-

cial side.

“We’ve also given them on-the-ground training and technical assistance to help implement and use those loan funds to help their farms and institutions be sustainable in the long-term,” Birge said. “That is where Father Steve comes in.”

When he asked if Kansas farmers and ranchers might partner with those in Africa, she said the Missio board thought it would be a natural partnership.

“It’s exciting to have a farmer-to-farmer relationship across thousands of miles from Kansas to Kenya and Zambia,” Birge said. “When we kicked this off, the farmers in Africa were grateful and excited. I think it’s exciting for them to have this connection to a successful farmer in the U.S. I think they really appreciate that support.”

Father Heina said the mentoring relationship is enriching to the Kansas participants.

“I think our mentors are already experiencing a benefit from this relationship,” he said. “It’s a two-way street as they begin to get



photo by Karen Bonar / The Register

Matt Thielen and Tom Murphy talk in one of the Thielen family fields. Murphy helped draft the farm mentoring pilot project.

acquainted with the project managers and learn about their situations in Africa. There’s something inspiring about these people who are so dedicated with very little physical resource. Even recognizing faith in their farming, it’s different than we in America or Kansas experience it.”

THE PILOT PROGRAM will continue, but Birge said she hopes Missio Invest can build upon it.

“I think we want to

expand more in the Salina Diocese, and also would love to expand this across the country,” she said. “I think what we’ve started here could really be a model for a way that all Catholics could get involved in this.”

For more information about Missio Invest, visit missioinvest.org.

For more information about how to support specific projects, such as the diesel-powered corn sheller, visit <https://bit.ly/3mDoUVU>.