

The Big Interview: Father Alex Osei

Father Alex Osei has always been a missionary priest, first in Africa and for more than a decade in Canada. However, few people would know about his work today as the national director for English-speaking Canada of the Pontifical Mission Societies, which support some of the world's poorest countries through more than 6,000 projects.

The Pontifical Missions is an umbrella group for four societies. Each is tasked with various aspects evangelization, building schools, hospitals, dioceses and churches, supporting children and training seminarians. In the Archdiocese of Edmonton, donations to Together We Serve continue to support the Pontifical Mission Societies through the work of the Propagation of the Faith.

In many other dioceses, a special collection is taken up on World Missions Sunday in the fall, in support of the missions and missionaries like Father Osei.

Father Osei was born and raised in Kumasi, central Ghana. A member of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, he will celebrate 25 years as a priest next year having served in Africa, as well as in the Archdioceses of Regina and Toronto, where he currently lives.

He is in his second term as the national director of the Pontifical Missions, having been recommended in 2013 by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and its then-president, Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith, and appointed by the Vatican.

Father Osei was in St. Albert last month to celebrate the Holy Childhood Mass. The Holy Childhood Association – another of the four Pontifical Mission societies – is a charity in which Canadian children raise money for their less-fortunate counterparts in developing countries.

While in Edmonton, Father Osei sat down for an interview with Grandin Media about the projects supported by the Pontifical Missions Societies, the need for more donations, as well as his life in Africa and what it means to be a missionary priest.

Father Osei, what was your life like in Ghana? How did you come to the priesthood?

Well, I finished university and I was working. I worked as a sales manager. My parish priest was a Spiritan, an old man, and a few Spiritans were working there. I, at times, looked at them racing in their Volkswagen Beetles going to villages for masses and other things. So I kind of thought, 'I want to be like them,' to be missionaries, to be moving out into the country and also

proclaiming the Gospel.



Father Alex Osei meets with elementary school children in Nigeria. PMS, through the Holy Childhood Association, sponsored their school, providing breakfast and lunch programs, uniforms, educational supplies, and classroom furniture. Fr. Alex Osei, C. S.Sp./PMS Canada

I approached my parish priest and he said, 'Oh no. You know what, let's pray over it.' So it took me about two, three years, but I just quit my job and I decided I wanted to be a Spiritan. I wanted to go out and be a missionary.

As a missionary, I've worked all over. I worked in Gambia and I worked in Nigeria. In 2003, I came to the Archdiocese of Regina as the pastor of St. Joseph's Parish. I was there for six years. My congregation then sent me to Toronto as a director for immigrants making sure that they are settled and making sure they are able to interact well with people and find themselves a safe home.

I was then called by the Conference of Bishops to this position. I finished my first term, and I have been re-nominated for a second term.

What was it about the priesthood that attracted you?

What really attracted me was the life of my parish priest and the Spiritans living there, their availability in terms of meeting people, discussing with them, and making sure that people are free to express themselves and that people are devoted to the Eucharist.

I felt this is what I want to do and this is what I want to give my life for, not hanging on to what I have, salary, riches ... No, no no. I want to give myself as they have done; leaving their comfortable home to come to our area, and then in the bush, driving to go and celebrate Mass in the dust and everything. I want to be like them.

At times, when I come home on holidays, I go with them. I miss Ghana as a home, but as a missionary, wherever you find yourself is a home. I miss who I grew up with. We went to school together. But it's OK, today we have electronics, so you just video them and we start talking. It's good. My parents, I'm also in touch with them, so that's OK.

In the Archdiocese of Edmonton, the Together We Serve fundraising appeal supports the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, one of four Pontifical Mission Societies. When donors contribute to TWS, where does their money go?

I want to thank the donors. I want to express my gratitude for their donations. Whatever they give goes to the development of the Church as a whole.

Every diocese contributes and this is done through World Missions Sunday. And it's all over the world, whether it is a poor or rich parish. It is once a year that the Church raises that money to continue the work of evangelization, the missionary work entrusted to the Church, the Pope and to all the bishops.

This year we have 6,000 projects waiting for us in Rome. We're going to look through, approve them. Those who qualify we'll give them the money. We send it through the Vatican Bank. We don't just send the money directly to Rome. We administer the World Missions money and it goes to the mission territories.

Can you talk about some projects around the world?

Last year I was in Kenya. I was in Uganda. I was in Ghana. I was in Nigeria. I get firsthand information and was able to see structures, building churches, chapels, rectories, mission houses and then some areas that needed vehicles. This is where the money is being spent and I go and inspect them. I want to assure them that their money is being put to good use.



PMS provided funds for St. Mary's Minor Seminary school in Uganda. Father Alex Osei, C. S.Sp./PMS Canada

I was in Uganda and they took me to a school, a seminary. I saw a dormitory where the children are and how bullets had entered the wall killing some teachers and some students. I came back and I really asked people to help so that we can fix the seminary, which we have done. The need is great. Very much. Very much. Even the bathrooms, they need money to put them into proper shape.

What are you most proud of in your first term as Canadian director and what are some of the challenges?

I am very happy and I am proud seeing money sent from Canada for a project and its being done. Many times people think 'Where has our money gone to?' I really want to assure them that I go to project sites. I'm proud and happy that the bishops are using the money for a good purpose.

The challenge is the money has dwindled. It has gone down and it's difficult to get what we need to continue to do the good work of the Church. This year, for instance, we didn't receive a lot. We're less than even \$2 million.

These are the challenges that I am facing now, to raise funds. Just as I was coming, I got an email from Rome reminding me that 'Oh, this year your donations, your support, has gone down 35 per cent, so we're praying that next year you do your best to increase.' What can we do? We only appeal to people.

I'm proud that Canada is among the 10 best countries in terms of donations to the Church. Even though it's gone down, I'm happy.

Priests have a role to play. Pastors have a role to play. If they don't talk about it during World Missions Sunday, we can't get it. Those who know it will do it. The onus is on the pastors. That day is set aside, so they have to talk about it. Together you serve. They should make that a focus.

What other projects have touched your heart in your time as national director?

I went to Kenya. When I go there, even though I give them the money, I also talk to them about self-sufficiency, sustenance. In some areas, some schools are doing farming. They have cattle and other things to keep the school going. I was in Kenya and they initiated biogas ... which is supplying the school. I was so happy that at least if the money goes there it's used for the dormitory, building new places and other things. These are projects that I was proud to see.



Father Alex Osei, second from the right, inspects a major methane gas project that produces enough energy for St. Thomas Aquinas Major Seminary in Kenya. Father Alex Osei, C. S.Sp./PMS Canada

The recent request I got from Kenya was for a dormitory. When I went there to see, it was very bad. Everything was falling apart. Now the building is well constructed, painted, and the children were in front laughing and celebrating.

That gives me a joy that the Church in Canada is also helping and bringing life and joy in the lives of the people, the young ones, who perhaps in the near future will be priests. Who knows who will come and serve us here? Because the Church is a missionary church.

Father Osei, you were in the Edmonton area for the Holy Childhood Mass on May 2 in St. Albert. Why was it important for you to be here?

It's a joy to be here. Holy Childhood is celebrating 175 years of its existence. I was glad that I was invited to come and celebrate the Mass with the children and to thank them, to show my personal appreciation to the children for their donations, for their prayers. Many children out there don't have the privileges that they are getting here (in Edmonton) and it's also for them to develop the love of mission.

Children helping children: That is the focus of the Holy Childhood, so that children also have the idea of mission. Our children will grow up and develop the sense of mission, so the Church continues. It's not a stagnant Church but a Church that moves on, that is on a pilgrimage. And we will go along with our children.

How does your work now, as national director for the Pontifical Missions Society, fit in with your initial reasons for joining the priesthood?

It's mission work. And I'm a missionary. I decided to be a missionary priest and that brought me across the Atlantic, on a mission to Saskatchewan, on a mission to Toronto, and to this office as a missionary. It has not changed. I'm still doing missionary work.