



# Love in the midst of struggling

*Returned missionary  
Sheila Matthews continues a life  
of service and accompaniment*

| BY PATRICK NORBERTO |



Sheila learned a valuable lesson from the villagers with whom she worked. “They helped me to remember that you can celebrate God’s love in the midst of struggling,” she recalls.

In 1996, Sheila was called to a new challenge when she was elected to a leadership position with the Maryknoll Mission Association of the Faithful. For the next seven years, she played a **pivotal role in molding the association into the present-day Maryknoll Lay Missioners.**

Having been in mission for 16 years, Sheila understood better than most the challenges and issues lay missionaries face every day. That experience enabled her to support new missionaries as they adapted to new languages, foreign cultures and customs, and government structures. Sheila encouraged missionaries to listen to local people, “appreciate the fuller picture”

and “learn about the needs of the local communities.”

Marj Humphrey, Maryknoll Lay Missioners’ director of missions, points to Sheila’s kindness, compassion and integrity as her core strengths. “Sheila is very strong with accompanying people in their struggles. She is always present,” Marj says. She has also witnessed Sheila’s deep and abiding commitment to peace and justice. When violence and unrest surrounded Marj during her mission work in southern Sudan, Sheila comforted and supported her.

In the 15 years since she left Maryknoll Lay Missioners, **Sheila has continued a life of service and accompaniment.** She cared for both of her elderly parents, when their health was declining. Her mother died in 2005, and her father in 2012. She has also continued to be actively involved with the organi-

zation. In 2006 and 2008, she guided “Friends Across Borders” mission immersion trips to El Salvador for dozens of participants and she continued to give church talks.

Sheila’s generous heart has also inspired her to make monthly contributions as a

Sheila continues to believe, “It is important that we listen and allow them to find their own voice to express their needs and issues.”

Sheila is active on her parish’s social justice committee and is involved with Pax Christi and the National

“Companion in Mission” (CIM) sponsor — something she started while still a lay missionary.

Today Sheila is a **chaplain and faith community nurse** at St. Anne’s Hospital, an acute care Catholic hospital in Fall River, Massachusetts, founded by the Dominican Sisters of the Presentation. Working with patients with limited means,

Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette. She is also a student at the Boston College Graduate School of Theology and Ministry. Studying Pope Francis’ renewal of the mission of the church has led her to reflect on her own time in mission, especially in light of the pope’s recent document *Querida Amazonia*.

Sheila is quick to point out that during her time in Guatemala and El Salvador, she learned more from her neighbors than vice versa.

In one Guatemalan village, Sheila accompanied a severely malnourished child to the hospital. As the father and the child boarded Sheila’s jeep to head to the hospital, friends and neighbors came to see them off, wishing them well and also contributing money to help with the child’s medical expenses. They shared what little they had, which consisted mostly of coins. Sheila realized that she was not bringing the girl

to the life-saving treatment at the hospital; their village was *sending* them. By this act of generosity and compassion, they would accompany the little girl and her family.

“When we help, we do so as a community,” says Sheila. There is no better definition of mission.

**Patrick Norberto is the Donor Relations Officer of Maryknoll Lay Missioners.**

*Opposite page, left: Sheila Matthews, with returned missionary Jane Redig and Carmen Che de Caal, on their way to one of the villages in the Petén jungle of Guatemala to hold a clinic with a health promoter (c. 1990). Carmen, an indigenous Q’eqchi’ woman, went on to become the director of the health program.*

*Opposite page, right: Sheila at the Kerigma Quetzal educational center in Poptún, Guatemala, with neighbor kids (c. 1985).*

*Left: Sheila at St. Anne’s Hospital in Fall River, Massachusetts.*



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