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The Mission Doctors Association, Inc.

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In the spring of 1959 the Catholic Physicians’ Guild of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles held its first annual symposium. A monsignor, unknown to most of the doctors present, strode to the podium at intermission and told them of the needs of the mission lands for doctors. In the ensuing lively discussion, he pointed out that the life of a mission doctor need not be that of a “medicine man” in the bush but would more likely be that of a Catholic Albert Schweitzer since hospitals, clinics, etc. were ready and only waiting for doctors to staff them.

Interest in this challenge was such that the Guild president appointed a Medical Mission Committee to develop a program for the Guild and for the missions.

Mgr. Anthony J. Broussard, spiritual advisor to the Christians, Director of the Propagation of the Faith and founder of the Lay-Mission-Helpers, even then was suffering from multiple myeloma. He died in 1964, his work well started but far from finished. He had dedicated himself to the mission of Christ in pagan lands. His travels through the mission countries convinced him that the job was too large for the few clergy available. He felt the critical need for apostolic laymen.

He had found hundreds of hospitals without doctors and inadequate staffs of nurses and technicians. Many of these hospitals were well equipped but idle for lack of the necessary trained personnel. Most of the hospitals were built for doctors who, because of lack of a well-organized plan and particularly because they had an adequate preparation, left prematurely after a few weeks. In a few months or perhaps even a year, the local Bishops had been unable to find replacements, even though they had gone to considerable effort to do so by appealing in the United States and Europe. Many of these hospitals were now run by a Sister nurse and some were closed down completely.

During his worldwide mission tour, the Bishops asked Mgr. Broussard to help recruit doctors, nurses and other paramedical personnel. Some even promised to build and equip new complete hospitals where there was no such facility available. The Bishop further promised to supply suitable housing, local translation and in many instances, even food and a small stipend if only Mgr. Broussard could find the people who would come and stay for at least two or three years.

Several years previously Mgr. Broussard had founded the Lay-Mission-Helpers to recruit trainees. With the encouragement of the medical missions, when he appeared before the Physicians’ Guild, he felt that the time had come to recruit medical help.

Dr. James V. Maloney was appointed first chairman of the Medical Mission Committee. Dr. Maloney, Professor of Surgery at UCLA, and his colleagues were so successful in their development that their activities were soon greater than that of the parent Guild. Thus began the Mission Doctors Association.

Dr. Richard Lescot was first president. Its initial duties were spreading examinations of the Lay Mission Helpers who were going overseas. Soon one doctor volunteered for overseas duty, then two, then three. The movement gained momentum. It also gained approval. Cardinal McIntyre, Bishop Sheen, then Cardinal Agagianian and the Propaganda Fides joined the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in approval of M.D.A.

It was incorporated in the State of California as a lay, religious, charitable organization of doctors. Donations are tax deductible. M.D.A. is governed by an executive committee and board of directors. The active membership includes some interested nonmedical laymen, a few “paramedical” people, chiefly doctors and nurses approximately seventy, all active in various committees. Financial support comes from about 200 contributing members (Mission Doctors Aids) and an annual Benefit Dinner Dance at the Knollwood Country Club.

All funds collected are used to pay for transportation of the lay medical mission helpers, their families and personal effects to and from the missions, to help with insurance and a small monthly stipend and minimal expenses. All help is donated to the organization on a voluntary, gratis basis. Thus everyone involved shares in the good work.

One of the unique characters of M.D.A. lies chiefly in the fact that recruits must undergo a period of well planned spiritual preparation of at least nine months. During this time the prospective missionaries must live in or near Los Angeles, where the classes are conducted. The Board is ready and able to help them where necessary with transportation, housing, and to find employment—usually in a local hospital, so that they can continue to support their own families, and in some cases increase their medical proficiency.

Since the Lay Mission Helpers training program was already established, and in order not to duplicate these efforts, aspirants to the medical missions receive the same spiritual formation as the L.M.H. members. In conjunction some special preparation is given in tropical medicine, languages and missionology. Lay medical mission helpers follow the same Rule of Life which was written by Mgr. Broussard and they also wear the special ring which proclaims, “For we are God’s helpers.”

The classes are conducted on Wednesday and Friday nights and on Sunday afternoons which is followed by a social hour and dinner. The course occupies about 10 clock hours a week. Lectures are given by Mgr. Laubacher and his assistant, Father O’Leary and a missionary priest of the White Fathers Society, as well as presentations by visiting missionaries and returned L.M.H. ’s. The areas of study are in aesthetic theology, moral theology, missionology and language. Those who have completed the training and have served as missionaries are unanimous in their agreement that the Course is essential for all who would wish to go to the missions. Even had they not been able to go overseas they would have been extremely thankful for this opportunity because it provided them a completely new life of dedication to Christ.

During the doctors’ stay here in Los Angeles, final selection is made. Arrangements are also made with the responsible missionary Bishops permitting to practice, and visas are secured. This requires several months. After all of these details are completed, packing and餐饮, shipping, procuring insurance, etc., follow. It is especially at this time that the lay mission-
aries appreciate the help of M.D.A. and L.M.H. who have had a considerable experience and have standard procedures established to solve these problems. At first, these nine months seem to be a long period, but actually the days are so full of preparation that they pass quickly.

Lay medical mission helpers usually volunteer for three years; after which they are brought home. If they should desire to return, another contract is negotiated for a second or third term of three years each. Some wish to spend a lifetime, but after three years they deserve a rest back home, and an opportunity to visit relatives and friends. Furthermore, they need a brief respite.

To date five physicians and one dentist have been sent with their families to Africa. Four are presently working there, two in Southern Rhodesia at Driftefontein Mission and two at Malawi (formerly Nyasaland), one at Likuni Mission, the other at Nampula. Two others have completed their tours and have returned home.

In Southern Rhodesia are Dr. and Mrs. James Carey and their five children. Jim is a well-qualified surgeon and he now operates a modern 300 bed tuberculosis sanatorium and a fine new 150 bed general hospital. Dr. and Mrs. Joseph Kirby are also at Driftefontein. Joe is a dentist who is also trained in anaesthesiology. Madlene, his wife, is a registered nurse who works in the hospital.

These two hospitals were opened and operated by Dr. Tom Bain, a medical doctor who has had considerable experience and personal information acquired by Msgr. Brouwers from his visits. The present director of the Society for Propagation of the Faith and his assistant have also visited these missions in several occasions and last year one of M.D.A.'s Board of Directors (CW) was sent on a fact finding tour of Africa where he evaluated the hospitals and general conditions in a great number of “bush missions.”

This information has strengthened the conviction that once the responsibility for a mission hospital has been accepted, it will be kept staffed and functioning efficiently before any new enterprises will be started. So far, thanks God, M.D.A. has been able to keep this promise. The only way that M.D.A. can expand to new areas will be by having an increasing number of recruits. In fact, M.D.A. is now at a point where it must have more new members in order to be certain of replacing those doctors who are already in Africa. Dr. Sorensen's term will be completed in one year, Dr. Fitzgerald's in two years, and Dr. Kirby this spring. Dr. Carey still has 2½ more years. There is one physician each for this year's and next year's classes and many more are urgently needed.

With proper publicity and recruiting, M.D.A. should be able to find five or ten physicians each year who will volunteer these few years to serve as instruments of Christ, as Medical Missionaries. M.D.A. has a very complete program—it just needs people. It is still working on its first objective, that of sending physicians and dentists to the missions. Eventually, as it grows stronger, it needs self-sufficient M.D.A. may be able to assume a second objective to staff mission hospitals completely with lay medical mission helpers. Nevertheless, doctors, nurses and other paramedically trained people owe much to the L.M.H. organization and we wish to keep the close association with the Lay Mission Helpers since they presently recruit, train, and send paramedical personnel and give us priority in their assignment.

As M.D.A. grows, there is an ever increasing need for Mission Doctors. In the past, M.D.A. had to pay for ever mounting expenses. Not everyone is called to go to the missions but everyone is asked to help by furthering His work. M.D.A. is a layman's medical missionary organization that gives an opportunity for all, priest and publican, to share in this work of healing the sick and furthering Christ's mission. M.D.A. can supply a speaker with appropriate visual material for organizational meetings and can mail literature to interested groups or individuals.

Msgr. Brouwers used to say that, “Nothing succeeds like success.” Thanks to Almighty God, and through the Monsignor's planning, screening of sites and personnel, and thorough spiritual training, M.D.A. has succeeded modestly in these past five and one-half years. God willing, it will continue to grow into a stronger and more efficient, more successful instrument of His love.