

An Angel of Mercy In the Desert

She's 87, but her age hasn't stopped Agnes Numer from feeding the world's poor from her makeshift ministry base in rural California.

Agnes Numer (center) with students at her school in the Philippines.

Agnes Numer has much in common with Moses. She spends lots of time in the desert, looks to the heavens for "manna" for her people and has never written a letter of appeal asking for help. While Moses led the Jewish people out of captivity into the promised land, "Sister Agnes," as she's nicknamed, plucks the poor out of poverty and directs them toward God's promises.

Scores of needy people regard her as another Mother Teresa. She is to them the unsung provider of their next meal, their advocate for medical treatment, even their teacher of lessons on husbandry. Ironically, though she once had a personal meeting with Pope John Paul II and has been honored by President Bush, most of the people she aids do not even know her name. To them, she is simply a rescuer, their hero.

At age 87, she operates her Sommer Haven ministry from a cluster of salvaged mobile homes in the Mojave Desert of California. Her land has been designated for an international airport, but for now it's her headquarters from which she quietly directs her unorthodox aid and redevelopment agency and its all-volunteer force of about 60.

Together, they touch distant outposts that include Indonesia, Israel, Nigeria, Cambodia, as well as the state of Nagaland, India, and the U.S. Navajo Indian nation. Sommer Haven sends out about 10 cargo-sized containers of food and medical

supplies a year, and sponsors training centers, dispatches missionaries and runs literacy programs. The ministry maintains full-time schools in Mexico, the Philippines and Palmdale, California.

In Southern California alone, it supplies 52 smaller ministries (food banks, churches and the like) weekly with staples, canned goods, medicine and whatever else comes in from a loose and growing network of donors. Sister Agnes and her headquarters staff also assist about 60 walk-ins a day.

“Money means nothing to me except to give it,” Sister Agnes says. “God could put untold riches into my hands, but it would only be to meet the needs of the world.”

Born in a small Ohio town, Sister Agnes knew poverty early. Her mother died when Agnes was 11, two years before the Great Depression began. Postponing her education, Agnes spent five years taking care of her siblings and learning to grow food, a lesson she would later teach in impoverished nations. At 16, hardened and bitter, she accepted Jesus as her Savior at a Methodist tent-revival meeting after being invited by her mailman.

Life was never again the same. She says that soon after her conversion God planted in her a desire to take the gospel to Africa, India and China. At age 18, God told her, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you,” she adds. She did not fully realize at the time that His promise to her would first mean 40 years of training, then—after she had married and raised her family—40 years of ministry, so far.

“God has told me I will pass over 100 years and not die,” a still vigorous Sister Agnes says between sips of green tea. She gave up caffeine years ago because it made her heart jumpy. “I don’t feel any age. A little pain, yes, but no age. My ministry has not really even begun yet.”

She moved to Southern California in the 1940s and was baptized

in the Holy Spirit at a Foursquare church. Ten years later, she relocated to Palmdale and has been there since. All along, she has led small prayer and Bible-study groups and reached out to the poor.

It wasn't until 1976 that her ministry went international. She traveled to Nigeria and preached in remote villages. In one place she spent five hours instructing a pastor and his people on how to stand in prayer and fasting against communism, which, at the time, threatened to envelop the region.

As she returned home, she realized that it had been exactly 40 years since she received her first word from God about Moses. Soon she was off to India, where she ministered to Roman Catholic charismatics, received specific words from God and gained an ingrained passion for the poor of Bombay and beyond.

In Southern California, Sister Agnes and some volunteers ran vacation Bible schools and took bread to the Navajo Indians, later expanding to reach out to the Blackfoot in Montana.

The food distribution began in Sister Agnes' Palmdale neighborhood and was funded by money from an insurance policy. Local residents Ray Loya and his sons were collecting cans, trying to gather enough to exchange for a meal. The Sommer Haven team reached out to them. Today Loya volunteers as Sommer Haven's director of distribution, and his daughter, Tery, who at age 11 was a streetwise alcoholic, is married and works in full-time ministry.

Sister Agnes' initial impulse was to found Sommer Haven according to an established ministry model. "But God told me it would not be that way," she says—although the ministry does operate with a board of directors and follow full accountability guidelines. "He said to go to the markets and tell them what we were doing."

She did. Since then, markets, packinghouses, distributors, growers, food banks and even one local meat market have

donated. "It is not unusual to see tractor trailers come in here with full loads," says Sommer Haven volunteer Kathleen Thomas.

"I believe God will use America to feed the world," Sister Agnes adds. "There are many wealthy food manufacturers. They just need the vision."

Sommer Haven has never asked directly for contributions. Instead, Sister Agnes relies on faith. "As the needs are revealed," she says, "God meets them."

Sister Agnes recalls one need in particular. God had told her to give 13 people \$1,000 each. Problem was, she did not have \$13,000. She had not told anyone about God's direction, but an unmarked envelope with \$13,000 inside was delivered to Sommer Haven. One of the \$1,000 recipients, a group Sister Agnes had worked with in India, later told her that when they received the money they were down to their last meal and on the brink of dissolving the ministry.

Sister Agnes and her volunteers are now in the process of acquiring new headquarters and warehousing property in the Palmdale area. They have large tracts of donated land that will be used for developmental training farms in Cambodia, China and Israel, but they are awaiting the finances to begin operations. In the meantime, Sister Agnes prepares for new ministry training classes.

"God took a little housewife, who did not get to finish college, to give the world a vision for the lost," Kathy Van Zandt, who's been with Sommer Haven for 22 years and is director of its school, says about Sister Agnes. "She has shown me that the Christian life is not only reading the Bible, singing and going to church, but it is realizing that Christ in us must be poured out of us to the world."

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For more information, write Sommer Haven P.O. Box 525, Littlerock, CA 93543; or log on at . Send tax-deductible contributions to Christian Life Missions, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.