Sisters of Saint Francis
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*Charleston, South Carolina*

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## *Reflecting on Ministries in the Carolinas*

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**Dear Friends,**

Recently, two **Sisters from another community** shared their recollection of time spent with Rochester Franciscan Sisters who served in North and South Carolina:

***From Sister Kathy Buchheit, FSM:***

"It was 1981, when I first met Sisters Bernadine Jax and Irene Kelly at St. Mary's Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Soon, another Sister from my Congregation, Karen Heath, joined us.

"Bernadine and Irene were very involved in parish and community activities.They lived on John's Island. They were very devoted at Hebron St. Francis Center, working with senior African-American residents. How loved they were! They creatively made connections with members of Holy Spirit Parish, who had property and access to such private islands as Kiawah and Seabrook, and the members of the Center. These residents then were able to go back to visit cemeteries of their ancestors, as previously they had been moved off the island. I remember visiting the center, a place of welcome, prayer and laughter.

"They were very much a center of Holy Spirit. We were invited to be part of this vibrant parish. I recall the outreach to migrant workers in the summer, I also recall some very fun

times that Bernadine, Irene, Karen and I shared. There was always time for having fun. One Saturday morning, Karen and I interrupted Bernadine and Irene as they washed windows. We decided to all head out to the beach instead. We'd often share fun, food and sisterhood.

"I met other Rochester Franciscans in the area. Sister Maigread Conway and Colleen Waterman lived in a poor section of town in the north. They were very involved with parish, health and community activities, with a primary focus working with the African-American residents. They were 'no nonsense' in what they believed. Two others, Sisters Magella and Stephanie Kienest lived near the market area. They were blood sisters, always welcoming. I recall sadly that in later years they both died of brain tumors within months of each other.

"So, the years march on. Connections continue. Karen and I were both blessed to attend the Franciscan sabbatical program at Tau Center in Winona, Minnesota in 1999. Sister Ramona Miller was the director, along with many other influential Rochester Franciscan Sisters. The next year, Karen attended, as did Bernadine. There have been trips to Rochester, Minnesota... I am eternally grateful for my association with the wonderful Rochester Franciscan Sisters!"

***And from the aforementioned Dr. Karen Heath, FSM:***

"I met Sister Bernadine at St. Mary's Church with Sister Irene, in 1981. It has been a wonderful journey as we made a mark on the people we served. When I moved to Dillon, I had no way of knowing you would come to be our Parish pastoral administrator. You brought two parishes together - knowing that they had always been at odds with one another. Do you remember when their choirs came together to sing for you? It was their gift to you for all you had done for them.

"But most of all, how proud I was of you when you were asked to teach the administrators and serve on the priest personnel board --- never before had that happened. A true trailblazer! You also were gifted with the highest honor the Church can give with the papal honor "Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice" award. Well deserved for all you did for the diocese of South Carolina.

"We had a lot of good times with good Christ talks and just plan laughter and fun when needed. And, I so thank you for sharing my Oath ceremony when I graduated from the Medical School. It meant so much to me.

"I thank you for our friendship and gifts of life that we shared."

The following articles relay more of the personal stories and chapters in the lives of a few of the Rochester Franciscan Sisters who served in ministry in North and South Carolina.

We hope you enjoy their reflections!

*Kathy Gatliff*
Editor, Director of Communications

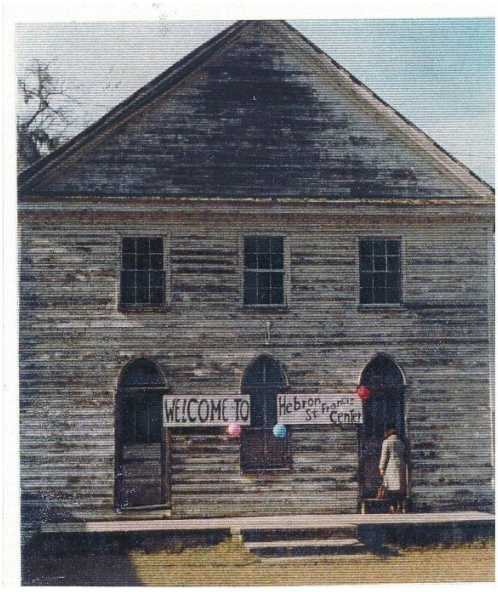
P.S. You will find this very apropos, considering February is Black History Month!

## Go Rebuild My Church

*by Sister Bernadine Jax*

*As with St. Francis, who received a vision from God to "Go, rebuild my Church," so, too, it seemed that Sister Bernadine would be tasked with a similar message. Here is an excerpt from Chapter 3 of "Carolina on My Mind."*

Our Bishop Unterkoefler dreamed that we might serve the Church on the Islands of Johns, Kiawah, Seabrook and Wadmalaw. He hoped that we could develop a place and presence where God's people could gather. For over 3 years, Sister Irene and I prayed that some door would open up for us so we could work with the poor. That door opened at an Ecumenical Ministerial Meeting at Holy Spirit Church in May 19, 1982. A black Presbyterian Minister, the Rev. John H. Washington, invited us to use the old vacant church that was built by freed slaves in 1870. It was the oldest church serving black parishioners on Johns Island. The large white, wooden, 2-story structure had become, over the past 5 years, a home for critters, insects, broken windows and dust just waiting for its new occupants. There was no water, heat or electricity, but it was ours to use each Wednesday for a rental fee of $500.




Our first challenge was to visit the folks around the Center to see if they would like to participate and support the mission. I can still picture the beautiful road lined with live oak trees and hanging moss that we were able to drive along each day. With the help of many volunteers, including people from St. Mary's, we opened with twenty folks, on a very cold Wednesday, January 19, 1983.

The years sped by and, gradually, we were able to get electricity, water, a kitchen and bathrooms. Still, we only had two small gas stoves to heat the Hebron St. Francis Center when needed. Our wonderful integrated group consisted of a few small children and mostly retired folks, who came together to pray, sing spirituals, clap in rhythm and enjoy lunch. They also made craft items and quilts, told stories and took trips to the mainland of Charleston.

Sister Bernadine is seated on the far left in the middle row.

Elijah B. Freeman, grandfather, farmer, and carpenter in the Center, became a close friend and supporter of Sister Irene and me. He told the true story of being attacked by a land alligator near his Church. He yelled loudly and a cousin heard him and came with a gun. The scar on his leg proved his harrowing experience.

I learned so much from living on Johns Island that I will never forget.

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## The Spirituality of Marching for Justice *by Sister Colleen Waterman*

*Only a short few weeks after our celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, we learn what it was truly like for our Rochester Franciscan Sisters serving in the southern United States during the time of turmoil in the 1960s. Here is an excerpt from "Memories of My Ministry in South Carolina."*

It was during Holy Week in 1969, when we became involved in a strike against the Medical University of South Carolina - primarily because our African American employees, who were nonprofessional, were not being given the seniority to which they were entitled. In fact, the white nonprofessional workers were given positions over their black counterparts. So, it happened that the National Healthcare Workers Union #1199 called for a strike of nonprofessional workers at the Medical University. Many of the people that we worked with in the Union Heights area were involved, so naturally, we became involved. And many *young* people were involved because their parents were involved in this hospital strike. It was very interesting, because we had marches, we had rallies, we had instructions and very spiritual ways of non-violence in speech and action. These were very spiritual rallies.

Of course, this was after Martin Luther King had been shot in 1968, and unrest continued in the area. Rev. Abernathy, Rev. Orange, came to be with us for added strength. Julian Bond and many of the persons that worked with Martin Luther King joined us for this strike. Sisters who ended up in the strike area were Sister Joachim, Sister Maigread and myself. We were involved in and walking in the marches. We were involved in all of the rallies. They were most spiritual. But we learned an awful lot about non-nonviolence. We had particular orders as to where we could walk during the marches and otherwise there were guards with billy clubs. Sister Joachim got a billy club in her belly one night, but she was okay.

There were, of course, many, many priests and ministers involved in this effort. Priests could be involved because the Bishop was behind them. Ministers of other denominations had difficulties because their parishes could fire them or get rid of them if their members were opposed to the strike. They met as a Ministerial Association trying to help out, trying to keep calmness through all of this, and certainly to eliminate any violence. Education for nonviolence was really tremendous, quite an experience for all of us. There was one particular day when the Ministerial Association was meeting and we were surrounded by military tanks. Very interesting, because anytime we began to move, the tanks started up towards us, which was really scary. There were arrests made, and so a number of our priests were put into jail or put in prison. They did that primarily to try to convey to the people of Charleston that this was serious; that they should really listen and know that this was very important that the nonprofessional people, particularly our African-American sisters and brothers, were being treated unfairly. The Medical University of South Carolina certainly needed to listen to this, so we continued with the marches and the rallies.

There were times that we began to boycott stores in downtown Charleston. If we hit the people of Charleston in their pocketbooks, maybe they would listen. I can remember one Saturday when we drove down King Street and you wouldn't see a white person on the street. We were so involved in this march and this situation, that I said to Sister Maigread, "If I were white I wouldn't be caught dead on the street today, and she said, "I think you are white." Anyway, it did all get resolved for the nonprofessional people and things changed at the Medical University. Following this particular strike, we were involved a sanitation strike, which was resolved as well.

Sister Colleen Waterman, front and center, at Echo House.

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*Note: 2019 marks the 50th Anniversary of the hospital workers strike #1099, which will be remembered in various ways in Charleston. Sister Colleen has been invited to attend the anniversary events.*

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