

# Saving the rains of Africa

story and photos by Sean Sprague

## Maryknoll Father brings waters of life, health and education to rural Kenyans

**T**he Mua Hills Girls High School in Machakos, Kenya, was in danger of closing for lack of water. With 440 girls attending the boarding school on a remote hilltop 50 miles from Nairobi, water was severely rationed.

The school had an old pump at a spring in the valley to send up water, but it kept breaking down, leaving the students and staff literally high and dry. From June to September—the dry season—the school would run out of water and have to pay to truck it in.


Enter Maryknoll Father John Lange, who has a special interest in providing safe drinking water to rural Kenyans.





Lange, who relies on funding from private donors and the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, repaired the old pump, added a new pump as a backup and installed a large system for harvesting rainwater from the roofs of the school buildings. A set of tanks, linked in series and holding 19,000 gallons, fills up quickly when it rains, while the pump from the spring fills a different tank.

"We were desperately short of water until Father Lange came to provide us with a new system," says Francisca Matee, the Mua Hills school principal. "The spring water is especially good as it has healthy minerals, so we encourage the girls to use that for drinking, while the



**Water diviner**  
*Maryknoll Father John Lange, left at Mass in shantytown of Mukuru Ruben in Nairobi, and above at water tank he built for the rural Mua Hills Girls High School.*





"In this land of poverty, it's hard for me to put all my eggs in one basket," the missionary from Dubuque, Iowa, says. "Actually, it's hard to stick to only six or seven baskets. There are needs all over."

Lange's baskets are big ones. He pays medical bills for 70 patients to the tune of \$4,500 a month, including surgeries. He paid out \$37,000 in just the first quarter of this year alone to help educate about 60 people—from elementary pupils to college students.

Water, though, is Lange's specialty. His water projects serve various rural communities in the Mount Kenya region and elsewhere. The missionary says he got into water projects "by accident" 10 years ago when he helped to repair a dam. That repair project at Sagana Maganjo in the foothills of Mount Kenya turned into a water distribution system with 10 miles of steel and plastic pipes to irrigate some 160 small farms. The cost was \$300,000, with \$125,000 provided by Partners in Mission of the

**At worship**  
*Scenes, above and below, from Mass by Father Lange in Nairobi, Kenya.*

rainwater is good for washing."

Lange, who celebrated his 50th anniversary of ordination in June, has spent most of his mission years in Africa, first in Tanzania and then in Kenya. At 77 he maintains a busy schedule that, besides attending to multiple water projects, includes visiting the sick in some of Nairobi's worst slums and referring them for medical care. He also helps with school fees for a long list of children and young adults, serves as chaplain and celebrates daily Mass for a group of African Sisters on whose compound he lives, and says a couple of Masses at urban shantytowns every Sunday.





Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers and the rest from Lange's friends and benefactors.

Since then more than \$1 million has passed through Lange's hands to finance his water projects in Africa, with \$200,000 of that coming over eight years from just one donor, who prefers anonymity.

A few times a week Lange also visits the Nairobi slum of Mukuru Ruben, where he is a well-known figure. Nairobi's slums rank among the worst in the world, and Mukuru is no exception. People live crowded into hot, fetid shacks with no running water or sanitation. Violence is common, although the priest says this area was fairly calm during intertribal violence earlier in the year following the disputed presidential election.

On his jaunts through the twisted alleys of the shantytowns, Lange visits the sick, prays with them, anoints them with holy oil and gives them vouchers they take to a clinic for treatment or medication. He pays the clinics according to the vouchers.

Lange is generous, but no pushover. He relies on reports from his social worker, Theresa Wangechi, and the various school Sisters he works with to ensure that people's medical complaints are sincere and that the students are keeping up in their studies.

"If students don't do well, we steer them to technical training," he says. "We can only help the poorest of the poor, but we try to get the best out of our money." ✠

## DANGER IN A DAY'S WORK

For Maryknoll Father John Lange a brush with death is all in a day's work in Nairobi, Kenya. The missionary was pulling off the city's main thoroughfare, Wayaki Way, onto a side street on Feb. 18, when another car blocked his way. Three men jumped out of the car, one of them brandishing an AK-47 assault rifle.

"One guy jammed himself into my driver's seat and another guy plunged into the far bucket seat," the missionary says. "They pushed, pulled and pummeled me, but I remained half on the driver and half on the other guy. They definitely wanted to take me hostage. But the guy was not able to drive the car. Somehow I was pushed and rolled, head over heels, out the opposite door onto the ground."

As Lange got up, he expected to see the "thugs" driving off in his car. But they were gone and his empty car rolled backwards into a small tree. "I looked on as a fierce gun battle raged," Lange says. "Plainclothes police had been hot on the trail of the hijackers. One of the thugs stopped a car on Wayaki Way and got into it. Police blasted out the windshield. He jumped out and started to run. Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat. I waited for him to fall, but he kept running down the middle of the road."

Lange took shelter at the nearby Assumption Sisters' house. Later, he found that a bullet had pierced his car's fuel tank.



He also learned that the guy with the AK-47 was shot and killed across the road and another of the assailants was shot half a mile away.

"I guess the Lord wants me to stay around a little while longer," the 77-year-old missionary says.