

# A SKETCH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT FATHERS' MISSION HISTORY



“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (John 20:21) “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all peoples everywhere.” (Matthew 28:19) By their baptism all Christians are incorporated into the missio Dei, God’s revelation of self – this mission of God has a Church, of which we are a part. The Church takes very seriously this “missionary mandate” of Jesus.

For this the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (aka the Holy Ghost Fathers) was founded, in Paris, in 1700. It began as a seminary for impoverished candidates for the priesthood, to serve the poor of rural France. Soon the “Spiritans” of this Seminary of the Holy Spirit were sending priests to the French overseas territories in Canada, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean.

After the French Revolution had decimated the congregation it was refounded in the 1840s by a charismatic Jewish convert, Francis Mary Paul Libermann, to serve freed slaves and other people of color. Africa became the focus of the congregation: the Spiritans were the first modern-day missionaries in West Africa (1840s) and in East Africa (1860s). The Spiritans’ charism has been first evangelization of peoples who have never heard the Gospel message and then inculturation, adaptation of that message, into the diverse cultures and traditions of these people.

The Spiritans came to this country in the 1870s – they were known then as the Holy Ghost Fathers. They ministered to immigrant and ethnic populations, including African-Americans, in urban ghettos and the rural South. For much of the last century the Spiritans supplied priests for many of St. Katharine Drexel’s works with “the poor and the abandoned”, the marginalized of society. The United States Province of the Congregation began in Pittsburgh, then expanded to Philadelphia, Harlem in New York, New England, Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, throughout the rural South, and then to the Southwest and California.

In keeping with the historical preference of the congregation American Spiritans began going to Africa in the 1920s. Having established many local Churches in what is now Tanzania the Spiritans, along with lay volunteers, are engaged with the Maasai people, the well-known herders in the semi-deserts of the Serengeti Plains. Ministry with refugee people more and more is becoming a focus. We have begun work with the Aborigines of Australia. For years we have been working in Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. Currently American Spiritans, along with confreres from Africa, are working in the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam, the homeland of many American confreres.

One-third of the 7 billion peoples of the world are Christian, of one sort or another. That leaves two-thirds who have not yet heard the Gospel in any meaningful way. God’s mission continues to be in our hands and hearts.