

NEWS POSTED ON MAY 28, 2019

After Two Decades of Service in Thailand, Karen Smith Begins New Role with IM



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“My passion for global mission and cross-cultural ministry is in my DNA,” said Karen Smith, International Ministries newly appointed Area Director (AD) for Africa.

Smith is not overstating her passion. Practically from birth, Smith has been immersed in ministry, first as a “missionary kid” serving with her IM-missionary parents, Ann and Hugh Smith in Hong Kong, China (1958-1976), then as an IM global servant herself in Thailand from 1999 to 2019.

As of May 1, 2019, Karen stepped into a new ministry role as Area Director for Africa, a leadership position that was held by recently-retired the Rev. Dr. Eleazar Ziherambere (EZ).

“EZ’s deep faith in Christ, along with the respect he has earned in Africa among IM’s global servants and partners, has created a warm and welcoming environment for me to enter as the new AD for Africa. I am deeply grateful to EZ for the impressive legacy he has left,” said Smith.

Regarding her vision of her role as AD, Smith explained, “My deepest passions are to support and equip IM’s global servants and their families and partners in Africa, and promote ministry health, vitality and sustainability. I feel God’s call to serve as AD for Africa. My long and productive involvement with IM has prepared me for this ministry, and I embrace this new opportunity with joy and gratitude.”

“We are very pleased that Karen has responded to God’s call to step into a new dimension of ministry supporting the work of her global servant colleagues and their partners on the continent of Africa,” said the Rev. Jim Bell, associate executive director for Global Mission. “She will draw from her extensive knowledge of IM, her already strong relationships with fellow global servants, her expertise gained from both her studies and experience and, of course, her deep devotion and commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ as she serves in this important role.”

Smith is grateful for her parents as strong and faithful role models in her early childhood and youth growing up in Hong Kong. In fact, Ann and Hugh, IM career missionaries themselves, have left a powerful legacy of Christian service both as missionaries, and later in the U.S., as Hugh held a leadership position on the IM home office staff.

“My parents’ lives and witness have had a profound influence on my faith journey. In response to God’s call, they became American Baptist missionaries and served in Hong Kong for nearly 20 years in ministries of relief, community development and support in partnership with the local Swatow-speaking churches,” added Smith.

“Throughout my childhood and early adolescence, I witnessed the church in Hong Kong at its very best: engaged, committed followers of Jesus working together to meet human need and sharing the Gospel,” said Smith. “It was then that God called me to serve him overseas.” After an initial career in vocational rehabilitation working with people with disabilities, Smith responded to the call and followed in her parents’ footsteps. She joined IM in 1999.

Smith’s first assignment was at the New Life Center Foundation (NLCF) in Thailand, a ministry where she continued to serve until her appointment as AD for Africa in 2019. “Working at the NLCF has been one of the deepest blessings of my life,” said Smith. Many NLCF residents are survivors of trafficking and other situations of abuse. The NLCF empowers young women with education and life skills. “Witnessing the residents’ growth, healing and faith journeys has brought me deep and abiding joy.” (Read more in her [recent journal](#).)

While serving as a global servant, Smith earned her Master of Science degree in Organizational Dynamics from the University of Pennsylvania (2018). In her capstone thesis, she studied the factors that influence expatriate-to-national leadership succession in Thailand’s non-profit sector. The results of this research can be generalized to countries in Africa and other cultural contexts.

From 2014-2016, Smith served as a leader in IM’s *Responding to the Call* strategic visioning process that resulted in a comprehensive strategic plan which guides the ministry to this day. “The process of appreciative inquiry gave me the opportunity to listen to all of our

constituencies, global servants, churches, pastors, ABC partner organizations, the IM board, missionary partnership team members, donors, friends and home staff. The data from these interviews shaped IM's vision for its third century of mission."

The Rev. Dr. Eleazar Ziherambere retired on April 30, 2019. He served in the role of Area Director to Africa from 2004–2009. In 2009, he moved to a full-time role as Director for African American Mission. In 2014, he again stepped into the role of Area Director for Africa. "Eleazar is deeply loved and highly respected by followers of Jesus world-wide for his ministry with IM and his leadership in the Baptist movement in Africa prior to his years with IM," said Bell. We wish him God's blessing in retirement and rejoice in God's provision of an able successor for Area Director for Africa in Karen Smith."

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