

FAITH, FAMILY, AND A HUNDRED YEARS OF MISSION

In September, Fr. Joe McDermott, SVD, passed away just a few months shy of his 100th birthday. In his nearly century-long life, this humble servant showed again and again that one person can make a difference — but when many join together, the impact can be extraordinary.

Born near Bankston, Iowa, Fr. Joe entered St. Paul's Mission House — the predecessor to Divine Word College — in 1939. After graduating in 1943 and completing his formation at Techny, Illinois, he was ordained in 1952. The following year, he was sent on mission to Papua New Guinea, where he would spend the next 23 years.

LIFE IN THE MISSION FIELDS

To reach his first assignment, Fr. Joe boarded a cargo ship in New Orleans for a month-long journey through the Panama Canal and on to Australia, before finally arriving in Papua New Guinea on December 1, 1953.

“The people of Papua New Guinea were happy and the pace was like going back in time, especially in the bush,” he once said. “There were no clocks. It was like walking into a different world. It’s slow paced, there’s no connections, no air strips at that time, no roads, no cars. We traveled by foot and horseback.”

In this remote corner of the world, Fr. Joe established schools, tended to health issues, introduced improved farming methods, and most importantly, cared for the pastoral needs of the people. Sometimes Mass was



celebrated with little more than a few sticks for an altar, but the people's deep faith and joyful spirit made those moments unforgettable.

LIGHTING THE VILLAGE

Among Fr. Joe's greatest accomplishments was bringing electricity to the village he served. The story began back in Iowa, where his father, Ambrose, worked with neighbors and friends in rural Dubuque County to design and build a water wheel that could generate power.



They carefully documented assembly instructions, tested the design, disassembled the wheel, and shipped it overseas — a process that took months. Once it arrived, Fr. Joe and a team of locals pieced it back together. When they finished, the community lit up with electricity for the first time ever.

“It was quite an act by many people. It was just fabulous and very magical over there,” remembered his sister, Bea Soens. “It was really something that those communities came together and so many people helped so much. It was a beautiful project.”

Though heavy rains later washed the wheel away and it had to be rebuilt, Bea said the effort was an inspiring project that symbolized the way people from different corners of the world could unite to achieve something extraordinary.

A NEW MISSION AT HOME

In 1976, Fr. Joe returned to Epworth at the invitation of Bro. Leonard Bauer, SVD, to work in the Development Office at Divine Word College. For nearly 25 years, he was a dedicated member of the team, reaching out to friends and benefactors. His easy-going personality and firsthand missionary experience made him a natural.

But Fr. Joe didn't just ask others to support the mission — he joined them.

In 1987, he deposited \$5 to create the Ambrose and Ruth McDermott Family Trust Fund, named in honor of his parents. His vow of poverty meant he had little money of his own, but what he had, he gave. Then he invited others to join in.

At family reunions, he handed out small cardboard banks to siblings, nieces, and nephews, encouraging them to collect spare change. Some boxes came back filled with pennies and nickels, others with dollar bills folded tightly inside.

“It was so wonderful that we knew we were participating in this great fund drive that Fr. Joe had,” Bea recalled. “He always prayed for more priests and brothers, and we thought we were contributing to that in some little way.”

Penny by penny, the fund grew. Today, the Ambrose and Ruth McDermott Trust has more than \$150,000 in it, supporting the education of future missionaries.

RIPPLES OF A LIFETIME

Fr. Joe retired in 1999, though he remained at DWC as a mentor until 2024, when he moved to Techny, Illinois. His impact continues to ripple outward. Just this past June, a man from the parish in Papua New Guinea where Fr. Joe once served reached out to ask about him. Though he had been only six years old when Fr. Joe left decades earlier, he still remembered the missionary fondly — and said parishioners continued to hold him in high regard for all he had done for their community.

At Fr. Joe's request, memorial gifts were directed to the Ambrose and Ruth McDermott Trust Fund. His funeral Mass was celebrated in the chapel of Divine Word College, the place he had loved and supported for so many years. The pews were filled with family, friends, students, and benefactors whose lives had been touched by his kindness, humor, and steady faith.

In the hallways outside, people lingered over photographs from his years abroad and at DWC, sharing stories of the many ways he carried the

mission of the Society of the Divine Word forward.

“He did big things, but he was always very humble about it,” Bea reflected.

A LEGACY FOR THE FUTURE

From a childhood on an Iowa farm to decades of mission in Papua New Guinea, from pioneering projects like the water wheel to the quiet collection of pennies from cardboard banks, Fr. Joe McDermott lived a life rooted in service.

He never sought recognition. What he wanted was simple: more missionaries to carry God's Word to the ends of the earth. Thanks to his vision, his family's partnership, and the generosity of many benefactors, his legacy continues through the education of the next generation of Divine Word Missionaries.

Fr. Joe's life is a reminder that it doesn't take grand gestures to change the world. Sometimes it begins with faith, a little imagination, and a pocket full of spare change.

WHAT IS A FAMILY TRUST FUND?

When you establish a Family Trust at Divine Word College, you create a living legacy that supports the education and spiritual formation of future Catholic missionary priests, brothers, and sisters.

A Family Trust:

- Can be created in the name of an individual or family
- Can be added to at any time, as often as you wish
- Becomes part of the Family Trust endowment at Divine Word College, where only the interest is used for scholarships
- Is established with a minimum of \$1,000

Your trust — your belief, your hope, your expectation — helps students realize their vocations and carry God's Word to the world.

To contribute to the Ambrose and Ruth McDermott Trust, or to establish one, contact the Development Office at develop@dwci.edu or **563.876.3353**.