

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Barbara Jean Harrington's Life of Service

Knut Holdhus
May 12, 2026



Barbara Jean Harrington (1938-2026)

세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)

Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

The woman who fed a mission: her sacrificial faith whose life embodied quiet service, humility, and total dedication became a gospel of compassion in action

On 29th April 2026, South Korean religion journalist Jeong Seong-su (정성수) published a reflective [column](#) in the newspaper [Segye Ilbo](#) commemorating the life of Barbara Jean Harrington (1938-2026), an American missionary supporter whose decades of service in Africa left a profound impression on communities across the continent. Written in a deeply elegiac and devotional tone, the article with the headline "[Carrying Love in Hamburgers, the Saintly Barbara Who Embraced Africa](#)", portrays Barbara not merely as a charitable worker or entrepreneur, but as a figure of sacrificial faith whose life embodied quiet service, humility, and total dedication to others.

The [column](#) opens with an observation about the rarity of a single individual's death producing grief that transcends national borders and personal relationships. According to the writer, the passing of Barbara Harrington at the age of eighty-eight on 21st April triggered mourning in many African countries, revealing the extraordinary scope of her influence.

The [article](#) notes that even former Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan offered words of tribute, an indication that her impact had reached not only ordinary families and missionaries but also prominent public figures. Jeong frames this widespread sorrow as evidence that Barbara's life had become something larger than a private biography; it had entered the realm of moral and spiritual history.

The [article](#) then traces Barbara's early years in the United States. Born in Missouri and raised in a devout Catholic family, she is described as someone for whom religion and compassion were intertwined from childhood onward. After completing high school, she entered nursing school at Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri and later worked in a maternity ward assisting mothers during childbirth. Jeong presents these experiences as formative, suggesting that her later humanitarian work in Africa was rooted in habits of care and sacrifice learned through nursing. The profession trained her not only to alleviate physical suffering but also to recognize dignity in vulnerable people, qualities that would later define her missionary support work.

A major turning point in Barbara's life came in 1969, when she and her younger sister Kathy Rigney joined the movement that was then called the [Unification Church](#) - now the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). In the [article](#)'s interpretation, this decision sharpened Barbara's sense of religious purpose and redirected her ambitions away from personal comfort toward service for a broader spiritual mission. Several years later, in 1975, Kathy Rigney was assigned as a [Unification Church](#) missionary to remote regions of Africa. Jeong emphasizes that Barbara did not regard her sister's mission as an individual undertaking. Instead, she viewed it as a collective responsibility demanding practical support as well as spiritual commitment.



Goodluck Jonathan, President of Nigeria 2010-2015

By 1981, Barbara herself had relocated to Côte d'Ivoire in order to help sustain missionary activities there. The article underscores the severe financial challenges faced by missionaries operating in impoverished regions. Rather than limiting herself to prayer or symbolic encouragement, Barbara sought a concrete economic solution. Her answer was unexpectedly simple: she established an American-style restaurant called "Hamburger House", intending to use its profits to fund missionary and humanitarian activities.

Jeong highlights the improbability of this venture. Barbara reportedly had no prior experience in the restaurant industry, yet she proceeded with determination. The columnist presents this decision as an example of practical faith in action. While some people contribute through preaching or direct evangelism, Barbara chose to support religious work through entrepreneurship. What began as a modest business in Côte d'Ivoire gradually expanded into several African countries, including Togo, Ghana, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of

Congo. Later, additional restaurants were established in Lagos, Nigeria, creating a stable financial infrastructure that supported missionary outreach and charitable initiatives.



However, the [article](#) insists that Barbara's significance cannot be measured by commercial success alone. Jeong repeatedly stresses her refusal to treat the businesses or their profits as personal property. According to the [column](#), the income generated by the restaurants was continually redirected toward educational assistance, medical care, missionary activities, and support for impoverished communities.

Even after health problems forced her to withdraw from active work in 2001, she reportedly retained little for herself. The article contrasts worldly standards of success - often defined by accumulation of wealth - with what it describes as a more spiritual measure based on generosity and self-sacrifice.

In his [article](#), Jeong also broadens the discussion into a reflection on the meaning of missionary work in poor regions of Africa. The [article](#) argues that genuine ministry involves more than religious teaching. Hungry children require food before doctrine; families trapped in despair require hope and practical assistance before abstract theological instruction. Within this framework, Barbara's hamburger restaurants become symbolic. The food sold there represented tuition for students, medicine for the sick, and logistical support enabling missionaries to continue their activities. For that reason, many people reportedly referred to her as "the Mother of Africa", a title meant to recognize both her material generosity and emotional care.

Another theme emphasized throughout the article is Barbara's humility. Jeong praises her for avoiding self-promotion and refusing public recognition. In an age characterized, in his view, by performative charity and self-advertisement, Barbara is portrayed as someone who preferred hidden service over visibility. Her achievements were expressed through sustained action rather than rhetoric or personal branding.

The [column](#) concludes with an account of Barbara's final illness. Despite suffering from advanced cancer, she reportedly maintained strong spiritual resolve. Jeong writes that one of her final wishes was to see [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) - also called [Mother Han](#) - regain freedom and continue her religious mission. This detail is presented as evidence that Barbara remained focused on the future of her faith community even while confronting death herself.

In its final lines, the [article](#) elevates Barbara Harrington into an almost saintly figure. Jeong compares her compassion to that of Mother Teresa and suggests that her memory will continue inspiring people across Africa. The piece ultimately serves both as a memorial tribute and as a broader meditation on sacrifice, faith, humility, and service to humanity.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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Saint Barbara, Who Carried Love on a Hamburger and Embraced Africa [Religious Column]

Input :2026-04-29 16:16 | correction :2026-04-29 17:17
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It is rare for the death of a single person to move an entire continent. If a life leaves deep ripples in the hearts of countless people across the ocean, transcending the grief of family and acquaintances, it is already history that has gone beyond a personal lifetime. It is said that waves of mourning swept across Africa when the news of the passing of Barbara Jean Harrington, who died at the age of 88 on April 21, was announced. Even former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan sent a message of eulogy. What is the reason why Africa mourned the death of an American woman so deeply?

Barbara was born in Missouri, USA, and grew up in a devout Catholic family. From a young age, faith was at the center of her life. After finishing high school, she entered the Jewish Hospital School of Nursing in St. Louis to pursue a career as a nurse, and after graduation, she worked in a hospital delivery room, assisting mothers in childbirth. Watching the moment a new life entered the world, she learned how to alleviate someone's suffering. Perhaps the dedication she would later dedicate to caring for the lives of many poor people in Africa had already begun back then.

In 1969, she joined the Unification Church along with her younger sister, Kathy Ligney. From then on, the direction of her life became even clearer. It was a resolution to live for a greater purpose than for her own comfort. Then, in 1975, as her sister Kathy was dispatched as a missionary to a remote region of Africa, Barbara's life entered a new chapter. While the world needs people to stand in the front, there are times when those who support from behind are even more desperately needed. When her sister was fulfilling her missionary calling on an unfamiliar continent, Barbara did not regard it as a path solely for her sister. As if she were born for her sister, she put her own life in order and headed to Côte d'Ivoire, Africa, in 1981. There, she faced the most realistic problems of the mission field. She had ideals, but finances were lacking. She did not just pray; she acted.

Surprisingly, the path she chose was a hamburger shop. Her idea was to open an American-style restaurant called 'Hamburger House' and use the profits to support missionary work. Although she had absolutely no experience in the restaurant business, she did not hesitate. Some people help others through preaching, while others help them through business. She chose the latter. The small shop that started in this way began in Côte d'Ivoire and expanded to Togo, Ghana, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Later, she operated three restaurants in Lagos, Nigeria, becoming a solid foundation for her missionary work.

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▲ Jeong Seong-su, a religion specialist reporter

However, her greatness did not lie in the success of her business. It lay in the fact that she never once claimed all those assets as her own. She dedicated all the profits from the restaurant business to Africa. It is said that even when she left the field in 2001 due to deteriorating health, she left almost nothing behind. The world often judges people by how much they have accumulated, but perhaps Heaven remembers people by how much they have given.

In the impoverished regions of Africa, missionary work is not merely about spreading religion. For a hungry child, food comes first; for an uneducated child, education comes first; and for a despairing family, instilling hope comes first. The hamburgers made by Mrs. Barbara were not just food. They were the tuition fees for children, the medicine for the sick, and the fuel of love that enabled the missionaries to continue their journey. That is why people called her not a businesswoman, but the "Mother of Africa." What is most touching is that she never revealed herself to the very end. She did not boast of her achievements, did not put her name first, and did not crave applause. While today's era is overflowing with performative acts of kindness, Mrs. Barbara was a person who shone brighter in her obscurity. She proved herself through concealment rather than exposure, through action rather than claims, and through results rather than words.

Her battle with illness in her later years was grueling. The cancer had metastasized throughout her body. Yet, even as her physical body crumbled, her spirit remained unbroken. It is said that she tried to overcome the disease until her very last breath. There was only one reason: her fervent wish to see President Han Hak-ja, whom she revered, regain her freedom and continue her mission. Barbara was a person who worried about the future of the community before her own suffering. Former President Goodluck Jonathan paid tribute to her as "a person who dedicated her life to peace." If many people visit and shed sincere tears at the passing of a single individual, isn't that truly the most successful life? Even in the afterlife, Mrs. Barbara will remain an eternal light illuminating the continent, praying for Africa. She was another African saint who resembled the love of Mother Teresa.



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The Korean HQ of the [Family Federation](#) in Cheongpa-dong, Seoul, here at the inauguration in May 2005. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

headquarters of the [Family Federation](#) to the media on 27th April 2026. Translated from the [text on the Korean language website](#) of the [Family Federation](#).

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1. Principle of Political Neutrality

As a purely religious organization, the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) has no affiliation with any specific political party or candidate and does not express support for or opposition to any election-related matter.

2. Prohibition of Election Campaigning and Political Activities

All forms of political activity that may violate the Public Official Election Act are prohibited, including encouraging party membership, supporting election campaigns, or inducing votes for specific candidates.

3. Prohibition of Private Organizations and Politically Linked Activities

The formation and operation of private organizations related to elections or political activities are prohibited.

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Improper speech, conduct, or individual activities that distort the identity of the [religious organization](#) or damage its reputation during the election process are prohibited.

7. Scope of Application and Responsibility

These guidelines apply at all times, regardless of whether an election period is underway. Any legal liability arising from violations of these guidelines shall rest solely with the individual responsible. In the case of clergy members and public officials, disciplinary action will be taken strictly and without exception in accordance with internal regulations.

27th April 27, 2026

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