

Turn unwanted gift cards into cash by selling them

Several well-established sites exist, but don't expect to get the full value. **In Money**

'The Floor' host Rob Lowe stirs up players' trash talk

He talks about other roles, making peace with losing "Footloose" and "Grey's Anatomy." **In Life**



BILL STREICHER/ USA TODAY SPORTS

Eagles loss exposes deeper problems

Philadelphia concludes NFL Week 17 in crisis mode as Green Bay takes control of its playoff fate. More winners and losers. **In Sports**

USA TODAY
THE NATION'S NEWS | \$3 | TUESDAY, JANUARY 2, 2024

E2

USA TODAY/SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY POLL

Biden seeks to mend a fraying coalition

Weaknesses have emerged among Black, Hispanic and younger voters

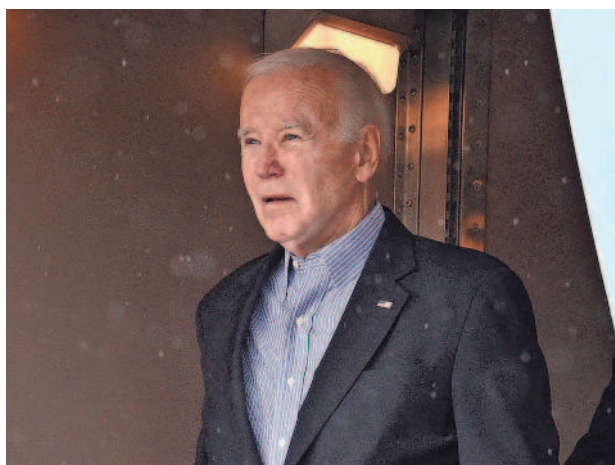
Susan Page, Savannah Kuchar and Sudiksha Kochi
USA TODAY

President Joe Biden heads into the election year showing alarming weakness among stalwarts of the Democratic base, with Donald Trump leading among Hispanic voters and young people. One in 5 Black voters now say they'll support a third-party candidate in November.

In a new USA TODAY/Suffolk University Poll, Biden's failure to consolidate support in key parts of the coalition that elected him in 2020 has left him narrowly trailing Trump, the likely Republican nominee, 39%-37%; 17% support an unnamed third-party candidate.

When seven candidates are specified by name, the former president's lead

See **BIDEN**, Page 4A



State bans on Trump will take time to resolve

What's ahead in the brewing legal fight over ballot eligibility. **4A**

President Joe Biden has seen fractures in his Democratic base. MANDEL NGAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Building 'a global immune system'

Four years into COVID, scientists hard at work

Karen Weintraub
USA TODAY

On Jan. 1, 2020, public health officials in the United States woke up to the news of a strange new virus in China. They didn't know what to make of it, but at Columbia University in Manhattan, Dr. Ian Lipkin was already nervous. Lipkin, a virologist, had spent his career studying pathogens and hoping to prevent the arrival of new ones.



Dr. Ian Lipkin, right, of Columbia University, meets with pulmonologist Zhong Nanshan in Guangzhou, China, on Jan. 29, 2020. GUO CHENG/AP

He had long pushed for closing the kind of live animal market that might have been the source of what became known as SARS-CoV-2. He would later argue that a low-security lab in Wuhan had no business studying dangerous pathogens – "end of story" – even if it was not the cause of the pandemic.

Now, on the fourth anniversary of that fateful time, Lipkin and his team at the Mailman School of Public Health are among a number of groups worldwide working to prevent the next global pandemic.

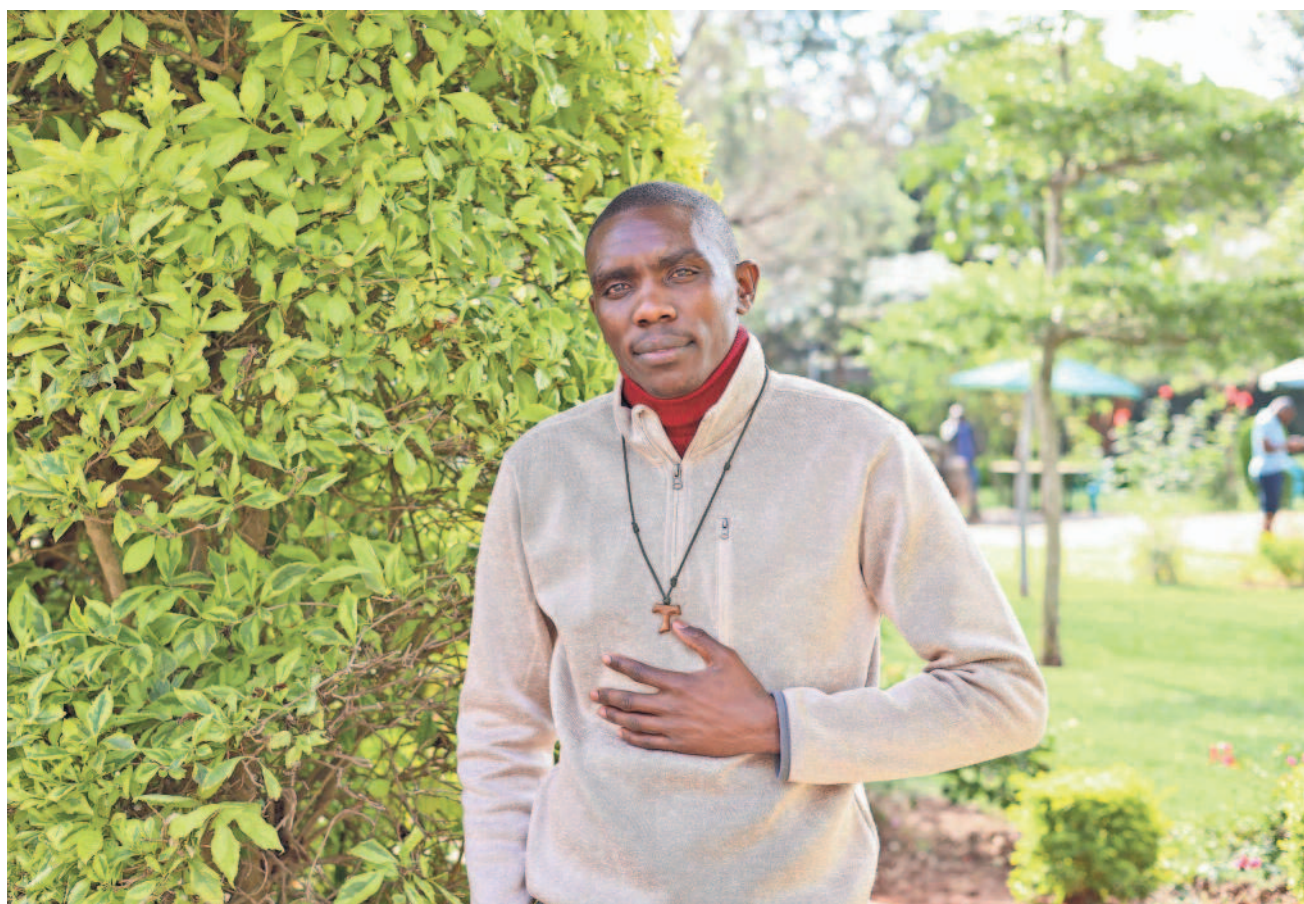
They have developed a system for quickly analyzing viruses, bacteria

See **PANDEMIC**, Page 3A

People are getting sick from a stew of viruses

"You can take your pick" of what's going around this winter. **2A**

Foreign missionaries mark a significant shift in Catholic Church



Michael Mong'are Ooga belongs to the Franciscan Missionaries of Hope. In August, he left the seminary in Kenya for Indiana, where he'll study for four years before becoming a priest. PHOTOS BY GRACE DOERFLER/SPECIAL TO USA TODAY

African priests filling voids in US parishes



Patrick Okok, a missionary from Kenya, works at Saint Rita of Cascia High School in Chicago as part of his training to become a Catholic priest.

"Because of the shortage of vocations in the priesthood as well as in religious life, religious institutes and dioceses here in the U.S. go outside of the U.S. to recruit new members."

Sister Thu Do
Research associate at Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate

Grace Doerfler
Special to USA TODAY

CHICAGO – On a sunny morning at St. Benedict the African Catholic Church on Chicago's South Side, the Rev. Rukulatwa Kiiguta stepped into the center of the sanctuary to preach.

"My brothers and sisters, yes, we do have this mission of saving souls by bringing them to Christ," he told the assembly, looking around at the 50-odd people gathered in the Black Catholic parish, many of whom nodded as he spoke.

Kiiguta moved to the U.S. from his home in Tanzania for exactly that reason. After meeting an American priest who had traveled to East Africa to recruit seminarians, Kiiguta joined the ranks of about 15 African priests in Chicago. He sees his work in the Englewood neighborhood – where many families struggle to make ends meet, but Catholics pour their hearts into their parish – as God's will.

This missionary's story reflects a fundamental shift in the American Catholic Church. After decades of U.S. missionaries traveling to Africa

See **MISSIONARIES**, Page 6A



HOME DELIVERY
1-800-872-0001, USATODAYSERVICE.COM

Puppies, purebreds among list of animals in shelters

Animals are staying longer, adding to problem

Marc Ramirez
USA TODAY

Among the many strays taken in this year by the Cuyahoga County Animal Shelter in suburban Cleveland was a vibrant 8-year-old black Labrador, weighing in at nearly 90 pounds.

He was the kind of dog the shelter at one time would have considered an easy adoption – social and handsome, with “a phenomenal personality,” said shelter administrator Mindy Naticchioni.

“Pre-pandemic, he would have been there a short time,” Naticchioni said. “People would have been lining up to get him. But he was with us for almost two months.”

The Cuyahoga County shelter situation illustrates the ongoing boom taking place in shelter facilities across the nation. Nearly a quarter of a million more pets are in shelters compared with the same time in 2022, according to one animal advocacy agency, exacerbating conditions for facilities already experiencing a pet population crisis.

Shelter Animals Count, an Atlanta-based nonprofit organization that maintains a national database of sheltered animal statistics, said about



Cortez at the West Valley Animal Shelter in Chatsworth, Calif. Shelter Animals Count says pets in shelters have risen to nearly a quarter of a million. PROVIDED BY JAMES POWEL

245,000 more dogs and cats were in shelters awaiting adoption or fostering over the holiday season, marking the third straight year that the tally rose.

“The number indicates that shelters are managing higher populations than they have the necessary capacity for,” said Stephanie Filer, executive director of Shelter Animals Count. “This isn’t a sustainable gap. It’s something that needs to be resolved quickly, or we will see a reduction of services or an increase in euthanasia.”

The Cuyahoga County shelter is de-

signed to house a population of 111 but has met or exceeded that total multiple times this year, Naticchioni said. Before the pandemic, dogs typically remained in the shelter for 15 to 18 days before being adopted or fostered out, she said; that range is now 28 to 30 days.

At the same time, the number of animals in the shelter per day has jumped from about 90 or 100 before the pandemic to close to 140 now.

“It’s not so much that we’re taking in more. They’re just staying substantially longer,” she said.

The estimated number of pets taken in by animal shelters annually ranges from 4 to 6 million.

While cats “are faring pretty well,” Filer said, dog adoptions are down 1.2% from 2022, Shelter Animals Count reported. Meanwhile, 5% more animals entered facilities in 2023 than left.

Shelters are seeing unprecedented numbers of puppies, Filer said – not to mention doodles, oodles and poos – as more small-breed dogs, purebreds and so-called “designer dogs” end up in such facilities for the same economic, logistical and behavioral reasons that other dogs do. Nearly 4 in 5 shelters replying to a Shelter Animals Count national survey said people “would be surprised” by the types of dogs in their populations.

Shelter Animals Count cited the rising side hustle of home breeding and the

ongoing problem of puppy mills among the reasons for the increase. More than half of shelters responding to the survey said they had taken in dogs from owners who had bought high-priced puppies that they were then unable to keep and breeders disposing of unsold puppies no longer wanted or needed.

Filer said while the number of owners surrendering dogs hasn’t necessarily increased, the number of strays has.

The overcrowding issues come as shelters face budget cuts and staffing shortages, competing with the service industry for potential employees.

Meanwhile, staff reductions and a national shortage of veterinarians make it difficult for shelters to keep up with adequate wellness care. One national study estimated that about 2.7 million spay and neuter surgeries were not performed as a result of the pandemic as animal shelters suspended services seen as nonessential, “which is why we’re seeing more shelters with puppies,” Filer said.

Shelter Animals Count encourages potential owners seeking to adopt dogs to visit local shelters and rescues or to use adoption databases such as AdoptAPet.com to find animals that need to be rehomed. Pets adopted from shelters and rescues generally also have the benefit of being already spayed or neutered, vaccinated and microchipped.

Missionaries

Continued from Page 1A

to convert and preach, the trend is reversing: Across the United States, parishes now rely on the ministry of international priests, many from East Africa and Nigeria.

The Archdiocese of Chicago, one of the biggest American dioceses, is a case in point – almost two-thirds of its priests younger than 50 were born outside the U.S.

It’s difficult to estimate the number of foreign missionaries in the U.S. because their paths are so diverse. But recent studies by Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) estimated the U.S. hosts some 6,600 international priests and more than 4,000 international nuns.

Meanwhile, the number of American priests is tumbling: There are 10,000 fewer priests now than there were two decades ago.

Sister Thu Do, a research associate at CARA, described the trend as “reverse missionary action.” She said the number of international priests and sisters has likely grown since the Georgetown center’s last study in 2019.

“Because of the shortage of vocations in the priesthood as well as in religious life, religious institutes and dioceses here in the U.S. go outside of the U.S. to recruit new members,” she said.

A century-old religious order changes with the times

Patrick Okok, a 32-year-old seminarian, is one such young man.

Okok grew up in Segga, a rural Kenyan town that’s an eight-hour drive outside Nairobi. Now, six years into his training and 8,000 miles from home, he’s living in Chicago, where temperatures fell into the 20s recently, preparing to become a missionary with the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers.

Maryknoll was founded in the United States over a century ago with the unique mission of sending its members permanently abroad to share their religion. Missionary groups like Maryknoll are a major reason for Catholicism’s widespread popularity in East Africa today.

But as American vocations have dwindled, Maryknoll’s identity has had to change, too. In 2016, the order began accepting applicants from other countries. Okok, who joined in 2017, was among the first international candidates to join the community.

Now, the order’s international numbers are thriving, according to the Rev. Mike Snyder, a Maryknoll priest. Almost 20 men are training to join the community now, with over two dozen others in East Africa contemplating entry into Maryknoll’s seminary.

An 8,000-mile journey of faith

A sincere, gentle-mannered man who’s quick to smile, Okok lives in a kaleidoscopically diverse household of Maryknoll members. Men from around the globe – including Mexico, Tanzania and Hong Kong – share meals, prayers, and coursework in the Chicago’s Hyde Park neighborhood. The housemates have



Seminarians laugh together outside their classroom building in a Nairobi, Kenya, neighborhood that’s so dense with churches and religious orders that it’s nicknamed the “Little Vatican.” GRACE DOERFLER/SPECIAL TO USA TODAY

learned to navigate their differences in living habits, languages and cultures, though Okok acknowledged it’s not always easy.

“The hardest part is also the fun part,” he said, laughing. “It has both sides like a coin, living in community. We are all from different backgrounds, different upbringings. You have to adjust a lot, moving in and living together.”

Okok will soon profess a permanent oath to the order, promising the rest of his life to the community. He hopes to be ordained a deacon this year and a priest in 2025. Once he is ordained, he will receive his mission assignment, where he will embark on his new life of service.

Embracing a lifetime of service

To join a missionary order like Maryknoll is to commit to a life spent far from family. The order finances visits back to Kenya only once every three years, and though Okok doesn’t yet know where he will be missioned, it will certainly not be anywhere on the continent of Africa – he believes he will be sent somewhere in Latin America or Asia.

“I miss home,” he said. “I miss my friends at home. But it’s also necessary that I’m where I am, because of the work and the service to people.”

It’s a far cry from his childhood in Segga, where he first imagined becoming a priest. In middle school, he noticed the altar servers in his home parish, drawn to the work they did during Mass. He paid close attention to the priests he met, studying the way they preached, how they connected with people, the respect they were given.

“During holidays, I would visit different congregations in different cities: Nairobi, Kisumu,” he said. “I was in touch with about seven different congregations while in high school.”

As a college student in Nairobi, Okok got to know the Catholic chaplain, a Maryknoll priest, and was surprised to find himself drawn to the missionary order.

In one Chicago parish, ‘a wonderful, blessed addition’

Life in Maryknoll has given Okok an education in the cross-cultural differ-

ences of global Catholicism and shown him the host of challenges facing the church in America: fewer priests and irreligious young people, financial struggles and the scars of the sexual abuse crisis.

It’s a different world from the church in Kenya, where Masses lasting two hours are packed and people dance and sing, praying with their whole bodies; where priests are revered as leaders in the community and treated with high respect. But Chicago Catholics welcome the international priests’ enthusiasm.

“They’re a wonderful, blessed addition to St. Benedict,” parishioner Kurt Davis said of the Maryknoll seminarians.

Kiiguta praised Okok for inviting more young people from the neighborhood to volunteer at the parish on Sundays.

Around the country, Catholic communities are responding similarly to missionaries’ presence.

They’re “full of energy and a sense of mission,” said Do, the Georgetown University researcher. “With the presence of international priests and sisters, the church will be more diverse and more welcoming.”

Where the churches are all packed

While many U.S. Catholic parishes stagnate, faith across the globe in Kenya is a study in contrasts.

On a hot summer morning in Siaya, in rural western Kenya near Okok’s hometown, just about everyone was on their way to church. The roads were crowded with pedestrians of all ages, and motorbikes kicked up clouds of red dust as they roared past. Loudspeakers blared, advertising to the neighborhood what was going on inside: the people singing, the preachers shouting exhortations in Swahili and the local dialect, Luo.

The churches in Siaya come in all shapes and sizes: from mud chapels to modest corrugated tin buildings to sturdier brick or concrete churches. But they are ubiquitous, and on Sundays, they are full.

St. Pantaleon Catholic Church, a white building perched atop a hill, was no exception. A small megaphone hung above the entrance, tinnily broadcast-

ing the progress of an early-morning service to the 500 people who stood outside waiting for the next mass to begin. They were dressed in their Sunday best: children twirled in tulle skirts and women wore hair wraps adorned with images of Jesus or a favorite saint. The choir huddled under a tree for one last rehearsal.

When the doors finally opened, one crowd replaced the last, cramming shoulder to shoulder into the pews.

Kenya’s ‘Little Vatican’

An exuberant conductor – a tall, skinny, smiling young man – bounced up and down as he led the music, gesturing to the tenors to sing louder. The congregation needed little encouragement: The liturgy was over two hours of hymns and prayers in which everyone participated, with dancing and laughter and ululation. Colorful Christmas lights blinked around a statue of Mary.

Families aren’t rich in Siaya, but when it was time to bring the traditional bread and wine to the altar, several dozen people got up to offer gifts from their homes: big bunches of bananas, baskets of tomatoes.

Then the parish took up a collection to support a local seminary student on his way back to classes in the capital. Standing at the front of the church, he smiled and told the people about his missionary training. In Nairobi, his seminary is in a suburb so dense with Catholic orders that it’s nicknamed the “little Vatican.”

The church’s future can be glimpsed in that Nairobi neighborhood, where one gated driveway after another proclaims aspiring priests and nuns live within: the Apostles of Jesus, the Little Missionary Sisters of Charity, the Sons of Divine Providence and myriad others.

‘Once I’ve committed myself, I cannot refuse,’ missionary says

Michael Mong’are Ooga, 30, belongs to the Franciscan Missionaries of Hope, a community established in Kenya in 1999. Its priests are dedicated to serving poor and marginalized people in Kenya and in countries around the world, Ooga said. In the U.S., the missionaries work in the South, including Alabama, Texas and Louisiana.

He’s nine years into his training and won’t know until his ordination where he’ll be sent – that decision is up to his superiors, part of the vow of obedience priests take. But Ooga is committed to serving God as a priest, wherever it takes him.

“Once I’ve committed myself, I cannot refuse,” he said.

“There is need,” Ooga said. “There is a scarcity of priests.”

For now, that commitment means small-town Indiana, where he’ll spend four years studying philosophy before taking his vows as a priest.

In August, Ooga bid farewell to his family in the western Kenyan town of Kisii. He packed his suitcase. He left behind the familiarity of life in Kenya: the urban bustle of Nairobi, the mild tropical weather, the fruit trees growing in the garden of his seminary.

Then, like thousands of others, he made the leap of faith and boarded a plane to travel to the United States for the first time.