Following the successful launch of Sputnik 1 by the Soviet Union in 1957 authorities in the US were concerned that Soviet engineers were getting too far ahead of their counterparts in the US. One of the consequences of this was to focus on a change in the way mathematics was taught in schools with emphasis on such concepts as set theory and number bases. This soon became known as New Mathematics and was quickly taken up by a number of European countries.

In the mid-1960s the School Mathematics Project (SMP) in Britain developed a series of books for secondary schools. In 1971 boxes of SMP books were flown to Malawi and a two-week in-service training course was organised for all maths teachers in Malawi’s secondary schools. A certain David Taylor arrived to lead the course. On the first morning David took a handful of stones from his pocket. The stones had some interesting shapes. He had found them on Mulanje Mountain. David then called for a show of hands to see how many of the teachers present had climbed Mulanje Mountain. When no hands went up he said ‘I see you have no initiative; I have been in the country only four days and already I have climbed Mulanje Mountain’. His audience looked confused. He was the only person in the hall that had climbing Mulanje Mountain as a top priority.

The two weeks of training proved to be totally inadequate for a smooth transition from a traditional teaching style to a classroom situation where students were moving around the classroom as they worked through various activities. Soon there were complaints from some school principals about lack of discipline during maths lessons. We were on leave in Ireland when President Banda ordered all SMP books to be removed from the schools. By the time I returned to Providence in October 1972 all SMP books were out of sight and we were back teaching arithmetic, algebra and geometry as three separate subjects.

Also while we were in Ireland complaints about food from some of the students at Providence reached the Ministry of Education. When a delegation from the Ministry visited Providence to follow up on the complaints Sr. Bertha did not give them much
of a hearing. The delegation was not impressed and shortly afterwards Sr. Bertha was ordered to leave Malawi. She caught up with us in Ireland, still in a state of shock. When we stopped in Rochfortbridge one evening to chat with a friend Bertha put her head out of our car window and said ‘I’m the one that was thrown out of Malawi’. This indeed was breaking news for our Rochfortbridge friend.

Providence without Bertha was a very different place. Her departure coincided with the breakup of the community of Montfort nuns at Providence. Following Vatican 2 most nuns wanted to be more independent and free to do their own thing. Some of the nuns left Malawi. One nun eloped with one of the Dutch priests from Chisitu parish and settled in Harare, where they lived happily for about a month. Three nuns remained at Providence and shared a new house with a wonderful view of Mulanje Mountain.