

Lay Volunteer Ministry – You can make a difference

BY FR. ALBERT FELICE-PACE, O.P.

Since the Second Vatican Council there has been a surge in lay ministry. When one attends the Sunday Mass, you see more lay people actively participating in the liturgy as Lectors, Eucharistic Ministers, Hospitality, Musicians and Singers. Today, because of the shortage of priests, a number of qualified lay people are appointed as Parish Administrators. You find lay people working as a Chancellor of a Diocese or in the marriage tribunal. Most of these ministries were performed only by the ordained minister before Vatican II.

But there are also lay volunteers who work behind the scenes and are not often recognized. In fact how many of you reading this article know that there are many volunteer organizations sponsored by various Catholic and religious orders and congregations? I am a firm believer of promoting volunteerism in the Catholic community. In my 40 years of campus ministry, I am very proud of the number of alumni from various universities that I served who joined volunteer groups such as the Dominican Volunteers USA, the Jesuit Volunteers, the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, and more.

How can you find out about these volunteer organizations? There are two excellent directories that are published each year that list volunteer opportunities: Response, a directory of full-time faith-based volunteer opportunities, published by Catholic Net-works of VOLUNTEER service and Connections, a directory of volunteer opportunities, published by St. Vincent Pallotti Center for Apostolic Development. According to Jim Lindsay, the Executive

Director of the Catholic Network of Volunteer Service, "more than 12,000 remarkable men and women continue to build bridges of hope sharing their incredible gifts of time, talent and treasure with the poor and the marginalized while exploring their spiritual life, striving to live simply, and reflecting on the connection of justice and faith." Most of these volunteers spend one, two or even three years in their respective ministry. Volunteers may be found tutoring refugees in English as a second language, building trades and construction, teaching religion in a city school, child care and day care, community organizing, health care issues, legal aide and para-legal to mention a few.

Jessica John and Stephanie Flax, alumni of the University of Nevada Las Vegas and former members of St. Thomas Catholic Newman community responded to the invitation to do volunteer work with the Dominican Volunteers USA which was officially established in 2001. Both chose to work in the inner city of Chicago – Jessica at St. Pius V grammar school as a PE teacher/teacher's aide, while Stephanie is currently working with homeless women at Deborah's Place.

Both of them were drawn to the Dominican Volunteers because they live in an inter-generational community – not just their peers but also with the Dominican sisters. Jessica said, "I had no idea what living with nuns was going to be like, but I was excited to find out. Now, four and a half years later, those 'nuns' are some of my closet friends." Stephanie, who has been living in the House of Connections with other two Dominican Volunteers and three Dominican Sisters for the last

few months, said that "community life is fun. It is very similar to living with roommates, but we all make a commitment to having a dedicated and set time to pray, to study and simply be together."

Does this year or more of volunteering have an impact on these young men and women? Jessica admits that, "the ten month experience changed my views about life, about living justly, about communal, simple living and about my catholic faith. I loved living in community so much that after my ten month commitment was over, I found a 'real job' and continued to live and pray and eat with those nuns and new volunteers for three more years."

Newman Center parishioners Ron and MaryAnn Overcamp-Martini did volunteer work in the early seventies. Ron, who now teaches at Ruthe Deskin Elementary, spent two years in Vista (Volunteers in Service to America) and the Peace Corps while MaryAnn was a member of the Jesuit Volunteers (JV) in 1972-73 and VISTA from 1973-77. Talking about their lasting experience

as volunteers, MaryAnn who is now a Professor of Social Work at UNLV said, "Both my husband and I served in full-time volunteer programs for several years before moving into the professional work. Taking an upbeat slogan from the JV program 'Be Ruined for Life' can speak well for the experience of dedicating a year or more to volunteerism, particularly in the Christian context. A person is just never the same again, stretched and deepened in ways that a normal year is unlikely to offer. For us, volunteerism laid a framework for the living of Christian values of

community, simple living, social justice and spirituality. We have more intensely lived and reflected on those virtues ever since as a result of our youthful experience of living intensely and intentionally with others."

A person can choose to do volunteer work for just three months. Many students opt to do some volunteer work during the summer. Erica Boutte, another member of the Newman Center and a first year law student at UNLV, decided to look into a volunteer position instead of working or taking summer school. After researching online Catholic volunteer programs she decided to apply to VIDES which is run by the Salesians. She worked "in a very small town on the Texas/Mexico border where the majority of people are fairly recent-immigrants." Together with eight other volunteers and four Salesians sisters, Erica started a day camp for the youth. "We got about 100 young people, almost everyone in the town, to come out every day and play games, read the Bible, do arts and crafts" said Erica.

Stephanie said that, "although I have been in community and at my mission for about two months, it has already been more fulfilling and rewarding than I expected." While Jessica said, "I would encourage any graduating senior to take the ten month challenge. Taking this time after graduation is NOT a waste of time, nor is it just buying time until you can figure out what you want to do with the rest of your life. No, in fact, I would say that volunteering for ten months is so necessary for young adults. It is important that you get out of our comfort zones, to experience a small part of living simply, to

pray, to preach what you believe with your actions, and to be committed to a job that is really challenging and to be supported by a faith community. I am proud of being an alumni of the Dominican Volunteers."

Both Response and Connections are excellent resources for a person who has the desire to do volunteer work. They both list a great number of volunteer programs. They give a description of the program, term of service, requirements and benefits. Both publications have a wonderful section containing questions to ask yourself and questions to ask the volunteer program. It will help you in the discernment process. As you discern whether or not volunteering is the right choice for you, you should ask: what am I looking for and why do I want to do volunteer work?

Volunteerism is rising. A study by the Corporation for National and Community Service showed that even on college campuses the number of college students volunteering grew more than 20 percent, from 2.7 million to 3.3 million, between 2002 and 2005. Altogether, about 30 percent of college students are volunteering in various fields especially with tutoring and mentor activities.

I would be very happy to meet with any one who wants more information about volunteer programs. One can reach me at the Newman Center at 736-0887 or 274-3734. Also, you can go to www.pallotticenter.org or www.cnvs.org or <http://www.cnvs.org/>.

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