



Shared Visions

A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers
presented by the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center ...

...The people who bring you Connections

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Volume Five, Number One

Overview: Along with thrill and excitement, new volunteers often enter a program with certain worries and concerns about what lies ahead. Fears, anxieties and frustrations commonly present themselves at the beginning of a lay volunteer experience.

This issue of *Shared Visions* explores different concerns that may be on your mind. Jenny Moulis, a former Cabrini Lay Missioner, describes her feelings surrounding the sudden change of setting in her life, the very new responsibilities and unfamiliar community environment. Jenny shares some discoveries and growth that resulted from those first months of her volunteer term. Paul Wheeler, a former SMA lay missioner, recounts unavoidable frustrations that he and most other new volunteers encounter. Paul takes us through those frustrations, as well as certain anxieties and challenges he faced in Africa.

Both writers found inner strengths and gifts that surfaced and helped them through the more difficult times. Through the group exercises and discussion questions, we invite you to examine your own anxieties, frustrations as well as strengths and gifts you've discovered during your first months as a lay volunteer.

In This Issue:

- Excitement, thrills, fears, anxieties and frustrations that accompany the first months as a volunteer.
- Discussion questions and group exercises.

Adjusting to any new situation can be difficult. I tried to keep this in mind during my first few weeks as a Cabrini Mission Corps lay volunteer at Cabrini High School in New Orleans. However, everything about my new situation seemed contrary to what I had always known. In a matter of days I went from living in a northern suburb with an active and boisterous family of seven, to living in a southern city with a religious community in a convent, and working in a campus ministry office with high school girls.

I could hardly believe how fast my life changed. The experience I was talking and thinking about for months had become reality, and I was not sure how I should feel. Fears of how to handle this new reality piled on top of anxieties I was already carrying with me. For months I lived with the uncertainty that I made the wrong decision to

Inner Strength and Facing Fears

Jenny Moulis, Former Cabrini Lay Missioner

volunteer after college. My parents were not convinced that I had chosen the best way to start my post-college years, especially without making any money -- how would I survive? I was also uneasy about the idea of devoting myself totally to lay missionary work when I was not even sure what direction I wanted my life to take. Furthermore, I had been away at college for four years and missed a lot of my family's changes. Was I prepared to be away from them for another year? When I finally arrived in New Orleans, my overwhelming fear was that I would discover my choice was not right. Yet something inside kept me going, eager to rid myself of all these doubts.

Although my transition into my lay missionary life was "cross-cultural" the "culture within a culture" adjustment was significant enough, and one not to be underestimated. There were challenges, and some that almost seemed like

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God's Call and Challenges

Paul Wheeler, Former SMA Lay Missioner

I've always been interested in new experiences, so I can't really say I had a lot of anxiety coming down off the plane. I served four years in Africa as a Lay Associate with the SMA Fathers, and spent two years in Liberia and two in the Ivory Coast. I went as one of the first lay people in a new program.

I was looking forward to going to Africa for so long that I had a sense of relief that I was finally there. Frustrations closed in soon after, though; there was one delay after another. I reached my final destination and actually began to work only after seven weeks in country. For a long time after arriving, I felt useless, like a fifth wheel. I think this was probably inevitable. I know it was a common experience. We're all going to be ignorant of culture and language, and we're all going to be unsure of how to get around in a new situation. I hope it makes us sympathetic to those we minister to, because to them we are the same kind of new experience.

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barriers, everywhere I looked. My ministry was working at Cabrini High School in campus ministry, something completely new and foreign to me. I never even went to Catholic school and was not well versed in Catholic school traditions. I was involved with campus ministry in college, but not to the degree in which I felt comfortable taking the lead role. I suppose it was my willingness to try new and different things, coupled with my idealistic outlook, that led me to this ministry. I knew I had creative writing skills and a basic foundation in Catholicism, besides a very youthful look about me. With perseverance, prayer and a lot of reading, I could somehow handle my ministerial challenges. Still bigger were my concerns about the challenges I faced in my community life.

The unknown of entering someone else's home and becoming a part of a community that is already established can be awkward and sometimes even threatening. Through my orientation with Cabrini Mission Corps, I learned that any place you go, you take with you your "baggage." Therefore, self awareness is extremely important. The everyday, seemingly trivial things start to really matter: having dinner at a certain time, desire to go out whenever or wherever you would like, having private time and space, to name a few. Along with knowing oneself comes having realistic expectations of a situation. In hindsight, I think I needed to be more aware of my expectations of community. Coming from a family with four brothers, I am used to a spontaneous lifestyle. Because everyone had different activities, nothing was ever planned. In a moment's notice, anything could happen. There was always a give and take within my family; we would always help out one another. In this whirlwind of happenings, I had my own place - a sense of belonging, of security, of comfort. Yet my new community was an older one of mostly retired sisters who had been together for a long time.

**I learned that anywhere
you go, you take with you
'baggage' . . .**

One of my greatest expectations of community was to be able to be open and communicative, to share thoughts, feelings and opinions. I found that my community was more subdued; everyone seemed to prefer to keep to themselves. When dinner and prayer times were generally quiet and non-interactive, I found myself offended and thought that I was the reason no one was talking or sharing. What I failed to do was look beyond myself to see why my community was so

quiet and private. After a lot of prayer, reflection and discussion with Mary Anne, my friend and fellow Cabrini Missionary, I came to the realization that it was not me; my community just had a different personality than I did. But I still couldn't help feeling isolated from my community.

I learned, though, ways to deal with my feelings and needs. I discovered an inner strength in my willingness to be flexible and to explore different viewpoints other than my own. This helped. It was a humbling experience as I tried to get to know my community members. It was a challenge not to

Persons Are Gifts

*Persons are gifts
which the Creator God sends
to us. . . wrapped.*

*Some come wrapped very beautifully,
some in very ordinary wrapping paper.*

*I am a person. Therefore, I am a gift.
A gift to myself, first of all.*

*God my Creator gave myself to me.
Maybe I've never seen the wonderful gift that I am.
Could God's gift be anything but beautiful?
I love the gifts which those who love me give to me.
Why not the gift of me?*

*And I am a gift to other persons.
Am I willing to be given to others?
to be a person for others?*

*Every meeting of persons is an exchange of gifts.
Love is a relationship between persons
who see themselves as they really are:
Gifts given by God to be given to others.*

-author unknown

assume I always knew what they were thinking. I never did get very close to my community, but I know that I gave an honest and genuine attempt to respect and understand each person. It became clear that I would need to seek out other sources of support outside my community. Mary Anne and I became good friends through many nights of talking, counseling and sometimes even complaining. I began going to a prayer group with people more my age. I joined a soccer team and went out with some of the teachers from the school. I tried to see the many cultural sites and experiences and all the diverse opportunities that New Orleans had to offer.

Through months of perseverance, I was able to find a healthy balance between my Cabrini community and my other interests.

Living in community, whether religious or lay, takes time, patience, giving and taking. Obviously we're all human, regardless of the differences in our backgrounds. I have learned that it is better not to bring preconceived notions to a new situation and live by them. Being open and willing to make the best of what any place, person or time has to offer is a philosophy I learned to adopt. There are always uncertainties; but there is time to resolve

them as well. As a new volunteer, I found communication and reflection essential. Consequently, something that I have really worked on this past year is not to be impetuous and ready to assume the worst of a situation. I have learned to rely more on faith and trust. Now, a year later, I have found that my new way of dealing with challenges works. Martin Luther King, Jr. once summed up what I learned and experienced: "It is not a matter of whether or not we will face challenges and sufferings in our lives; it is whether we will have the inner strength and peace to face them." ✚



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I probably didn't handle this feeling of uselessness very well. I tend to define myself and how I'm doing based on WHAT I'm doing. I think this is common to Americans, but it is not so to others, and where dependence is nothing to be ashamed of, it is an accepted norm that binds people together.

God's and Africa's greatest challenge to me . . .

Looking back, I think this was probably God's and Africa's greatest challenge to me. My best memories all seem to be the results of accidents that resulted when I made mistakes, when I didn't get what I expected, when I was delayed on the way to somewhere I really thought I had to be. Those were the times when I had the closest contact with people, when I was dependent on the people I had come to work among. I learned how to run at a different speed, and how to depend on people and allow them to lean on me without making a big deal of what a great favor I was doing for them.

I found help in unexpected places. Strangers in the middle of nowhere would stop to help when my truck's wheels were spinning in the bottom of a mud hole. People I had taken for granted would step forward with some advice, the kind you can naturally use. I made a lot of friends, and I've never used that word lightly; I became more intimately involved in people's lives, and learned more about different ways to live than I ever have in any other situation before or since. I relearned trusting myself, and was forced to go looking for social contact and moral support among the people I worked with. It ended up great. I found people and experiences that I wouldn't have found sitting in the house I lived in.

I think it is important for anyone in that situation to understand that this is God's call to a missionary to step outside one's self, to do what you're not necessarily

inclined to do, to find different ways to see and live. It can be a challenge to get out of the house of other Americans and to meet the locals on their terms; good things can result.

As a lay missionary, I also made the biggest mistakes in my life, mistakes that I will not recount here because I'd be embarrassed to. So often people are afraid of making mistakes. I'm glad for mine now, though. I have never encountered people more tolerant of mistakes than are the Africans. I've never encountered such material and spiritual generosity. I like to think I've learned a bit of this. I learned some tolerance and some patience, mostly because Africa backed me into a corner and forced me into these things. I am much more outgoing than I ever was before, much more inclined to take the first step forward, much more inclined to laugh.

Throughout my journey, there were some very difficult times. I have never been so lonely as some of the times I remember from Africa. I have never been so bored. I have never been so frustrated. I have never been so mystified by human nature. I've never been so close to hitting a few people. I have never been so afraid, standing as I was on the edge of a war and dealing with people who made that war their business.

I found gifts I didn't know were there . . .

But I will still recommend the work and the life. I found gifts in myself that I did not know were there. I found everything I needed, and it was a time I will always value, one that left a mark on me. One of the best things of going overseas is returning home. We need to come back and say, "Here's what I saw, and this is the way these people live. The American way is not the only way to be a human being or a Christian, and our choices are not the only choices." ✚

WORKSHEET QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Jenny spoke of the concerns and fears that surfaced when she moved from her boisterous northern suburban family setting to the comparatively subdued southern convent community. Although neither of these may be typical of your experience, describe your "from" and "to" and any fears or concerns that may be part of your "baggage."

2. Individuals handle their anxieties in their own personalized ways. Describe how you tend to handle them by circling those below that seem to apply to you:

talking with others going off by myself turning to prayer putting it out of my mind
doing a lot of self-examination relying exclusively on self relying on friends/family

3. Jenny said that as a new volunteer she found communication and reflection essential. Are there any areas or parts of your volunteer experiences, either at work or in your living situation in which you find it particularly helpful to reflect on or discuss with others? If so, which?

4. After Paul's initial excitement, certain frustrations set in as he tried to cope with new surroundings. Thinking of your own experience, what frustrations did you encounter with regard to the new setting and culture?

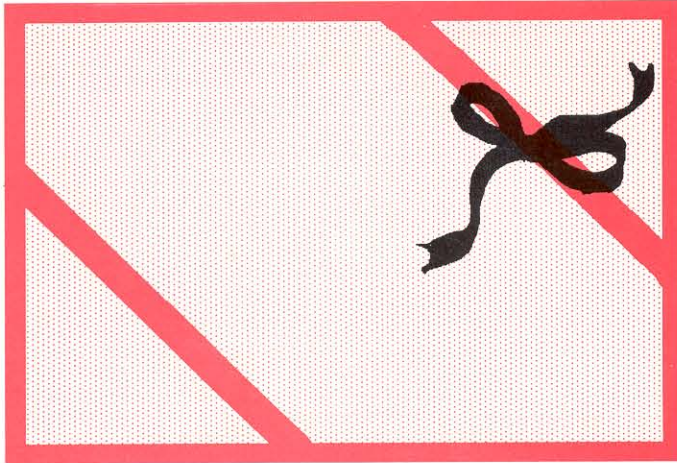
5. Paul felt challenged to go out on his own, to get to know the local people on their terms. Name two things that have not or won't come easy for you, but that you hope to challenge yourself to do.

6. Orientation can't prepare you for everything, as both articles show. Describe your setting. What weren't you prepared for?

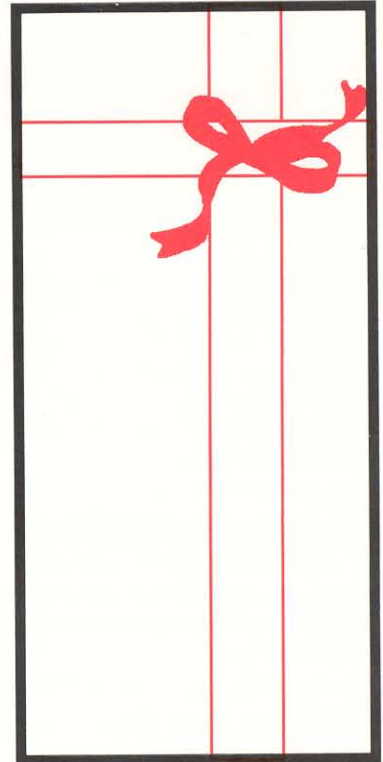
An Exchange of Gifts

Life itself is a gift - and each of us, our talents and strengths, are gifts we bring to one another. Often it is a challenge to get through the wrapping and reveal what is contained inside. What gifts do you bring to your community, and the people you encounter while you are here? Fill the boxes below with the gifts you bring from different areas of your life.

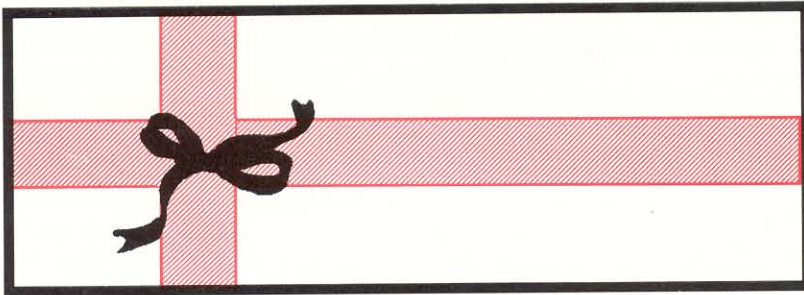
Gifts I see in myself



Gifts my family sees in me



Gifts I want to work on during my time here:



Gifts my friends see in me:



Gifts and talents I have kept wrapped or underdeveloped



Now as a community, share as much or as little as you'd like. Each community member take a turn revealing one or two gifts they bring to the group. Then give the others an opportunity to share the gifts they see in you.

A Theological/Biblical Question . . .

Christian theology, as with each discipline, is really a particular way of thinking, of seeing the world around us. It interprets the meaning of human events according to key themes, the most central of which for Jesus was the kingdom, or "reign of God."

The reign of God is described in Matthew 25 as present when the hungry are fed, the blind see and the naked are clothed. What are some ways in which your volunteering helps bring about this "Reign of God" for the people you serve?

Jesus told his followers, "The Kingdom of God is within you." What could Jesus mean by this? What are some ways in which your volunteering might help bring about this Reign of God within you?

(Send us your thoughts by Christmas. We'll follow up in our next issue of *Shared Visions*.)

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The mission of the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center:

To promote lay volunteer service that challenges the laity, clergy, and religious to work together in the mission of the Church. Our goal is to support lay volunteers *before, during and after* their term of service. Local Pallotti Centers are located in Boston, Memphis, Paterson, Saint Louis and Sacramento. The National Office is in Washington, DC.

The Centers take their inspiration from Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850) who believed passionately in the laity, in each person as being an image of God and as called to be missionary.

Shared Visions' goal is to explore five building blocks of spiritual development: Intellectual Growth, Emotional and Physical Health, Leadership and Prayer.



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