

SHARED VISIONS

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Volume Sixteen, Number Two

— A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers — presented by the people who bring you *Connections* —

Being Reflective On Your Volunteer Experience... Asking the Questions

The first issue, mailed to you in October, suggested ways you could increase “being attentive” to your volunteer experiences. This second issue provides activities for sharpening your understanding about your volunteer experiences by enhancing your ability to “be reflective” during your time as a volunteer or missionary.

This issue also provides food for thought about the central importance of Jesus’ Incarnation, not simply as the soon-to-arrive key calendar event of Christmas, but also as a principle central to your Christian spirituality. Volunteer service, like the Incarnation itself, is a way of embodying God’s love for humanity.

The four “bees” of this year’s theme, also called the pastoral circle, are steps toward self-transcendence, steps which many volunteers have found helpful: being attentive, being reflective (smart), being decisive and being persistent. Read on; we hope you find the activities insightful.



Being Reflective About Your Insights and Discoveries

One of the many benefits of volunteering is to gain new insights and discoveries about your expanding world and also about yourself. You are experiencing new perspectives and perhaps questioning former ones.

Here are a few questions to help you unpack some of the mind-expanding potential of your insights and discoveries. Give yourself some quiet time to think about and write down your findings concerning what you have been learning.

Reflecting on Your Expanding World

Example:

A volunteer was surprised to ‘discover’ that the poor were not always isolated individuals. Many actually had close family relationships, personal names, and faces.

- What is something you’ve learned about your clients, which surprises you?
- What are some stereotypes you may have held which you no longer believe? Examples may concern: ethnic groups, economic status, priests or religious, or the opposite sex.

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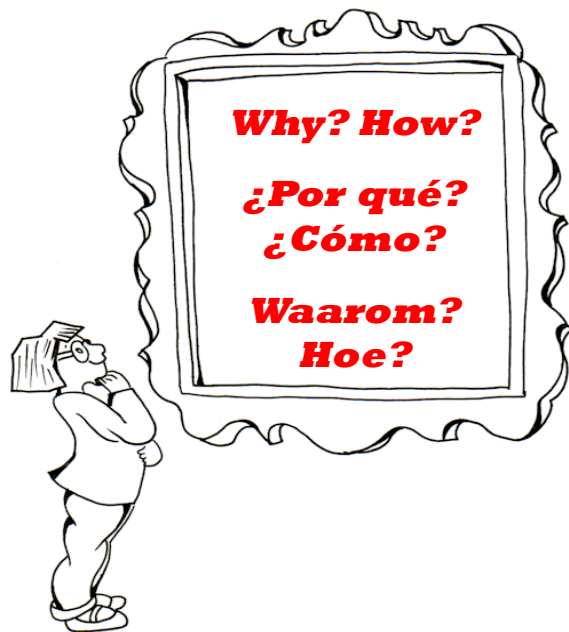
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Are You Seeing the Big Picture?

Here's an approach that might help you get a better handle on understanding your experiences at work or living in community. Ask yourself: How is this volunteer scene working? Like many volunteers, you may feel swamped just trying to get on top of your own piece of the puzzle such as mastering the local language, preparing lesson plans, or figuring out how to help challenging clients. You don't have much time to think about how your service fits in with the social, political, economic and other factors that shape and impact local situations. You may be asking yourself, "What can I do to help bring the bigger picture into focus?"

It's helpful to begin by setting aside some time to determine how all the parts of your volunteer service fit together. First, identify your resources of knowledge, experience and expertise that can help fill out your perspective. Here are some examples.



1. Your program's director and on-site staff are familiar with the volunteer experience. If you feel overwhelmed with the task of identifying how your service is making a difference locally, seek out their advice and perspective.

What's Your Take?

As a volunteer, what's your take on the situation of the people you serve? By now, you've gotten to know them somewhat well, and you see their personal strengths and a lot of their needs as well, which is why your volunteer program has placed you there to help.

Some important questions you may be asking yourself are: How did the people I serve get to be in the situation in which they now find themselves? What are some of the main influences that brought this about? And a question that's familiar to almost all volunteers: What can be done about it?

But before you can begin to answer that last question, you must first try to find answers to the first two through some analysis (investigation, study, data gathering, reflection) that



will hopefully lead you to understanding. Use the following questions, and after each one we've included a suggestion of something you can do to help yourself come to some answers.

2. The staff at your placement site know the work well. Invite a co-worker out to lunch (preferably someone who's been on staff longer than a year) and find out what their experience of the bigger picture has been like.
3. Your community members are great resources since they will have many of the same challenges. Take advantage of community time to discuss issues that you encounter in the workplace and find common themes that relate to the greater global community as well.
4. Former volunteers from your program can offer a third party point-of-view from first-hand experience. Ask your program if their contact information is available.
5. The people you serve know their experience better than anyone else can explain it to you. Observe how they interact with you and other staff. Take time to listen to their stories. What can you learn from them?

6. What other resources are available to you?

You can also do your own assessment of the bigger picture by observing and asking questions.

- If you are a teacher, utilize your free period to walk around the school and stealthily listen at the doorways of the other classrooms.
- If you work with children at a day care center, take time to get to know the kids and the parents. Invite the families to an evening meal at your home.
- If you work at a soup kitchen, try to visit places where the food donations come from in order to learn something about the donors and their motivation for giving.
- How else can you relate your piece of the puzzle to the bigger picture?

QUESTION: To what extent are ethnicity, educational background, language proficiency or immigrant status contributing factors to the local situation?

SUGGESTION: Talk to someone in a local social services agency (maybe even the one you work in) and ask them about the local causes of poverty.



QUESTION: How do government policies at the state or federal levels have an impact on the lives of these people?

SUGGESTION: Find a newspaper article, or material from a local political party that discusses the local political debate about the importance of helping those in poverty.



QUESTION: If you interact with a primarily immigrant population, how are today's immigrants or their situations different from those of earlier generations?

SUGGESTION: Talk to the people you work with and serve, and ask them about their parents' and their own experiences in previous decades.

QUESTION: Do you think your clients' families are slipping deeper into poverty? If so, what are the contributing factors?

SUGGESTION: Take a look at studies done and presented by advocacy groups, such as the Children's Defense Fund, that examine the trends among lower-income populations.



QUESTION: What are the main factors your fellow volunteers see as having an impact on the people they serve?

SUGGESTION: Introduce this as a topic for community night discussion.



QUESTION: What are the main factors your co-workers see as impacting on the people you serve?

SUGGESTION: Get together with some of your co-workers for an informal discussion of what their experiences have been while they have been working there.

Making Christmas and Incarnation Part of Your Spirituality, 24/7/365

The western culture has all but buried Christmas amid “SALE” signs, holiday jingles, TV specials, and street decorations that go up the day after Thanksgiving, all to get us into the mood for industrial-strength shopping. But we’re too smart for this hype, aren’t we? Besides, as penniless volunteers, we can escape the allure of the ads and the expectations to shell out bundles of money buying everyone gifts. If this gives us freedom from the commercialization and consumerism of the holidays, what then can we do as an alternative?

One possibility is to think about the phrase “taking on humanity” (Philippians 2:7) as exemplified by Jesus, who, by gradually maturing and becoming fully human, gave us the perfect challenge for our own lives: to also become fully human (Luke 2:52). Part of his “taking on humanity” was to recognize the needs of his neighbors and speak to their deeper hungers and the conditions that trapped them (acceptance of the status quo, over-dependence on authorities, lack of an alternative vision). Some gospel stories also suggest he allowed this to



be a two-way street and he allowed himself to be influenced by others (Matt. 15:21-28).

Whether individually or with fellow volunteers, consider the following questions, while keeping in mind the idea of how Jesus’s life was one of “taking on humanity”.

- What does it mean to me to be fully human?
- Of all the people I have known personally, who do I consider to be outstanding examples of what it means to be fully human?
- What are some ways I may be “taking on humanity,” e.g. when I consider others’ needs, or let other people’s humanity influence me for the better?
- If someone from another culture were to observe my behavior, what values might they see manifested or incarnated in my actions?
- What is one aspect of Jesus’ humanity I find myself most attracted to, and perhaps willing to imitate?
- What are some ways the first two “be’s” of the pastoral circle (being attentive and being reflective) contribute to your “taking on humanity?”

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- Sometimes you gain insights from the absence of something or someone. What have you learned through your experience of the absence of: money, cable TV, old friends, family, your car, your city of origin, etc?

Reflecting on Your Expanding Self

Example:

One volunteer discovered she had a hunger for spirituality, which was over and above her belonging to the Church. Another said his experience of making a difference in others’ lives made him realize that service would always be a part of his life.

- What is something you’ve learned about yourself that surprises you?
- What are some impressions you believed about yourself before you volunteered which now you no longer believe? Examples may concern: your ethnicity, economic status, talents or competencies, career aspirations, etc.
- What have you learned about yourself through your experience of simple living?

Community Affirming and Sharing

After you’ve had some time to reflect on your own experiences, get together with your fellow volunteers to share and affirm your findings.

Biblical Reflection: New Understandings *Often Begin With Questions*

“Lives can change in a split second.” Do you think this is true? A number of biblical stories tell of occasions when Jesus performs a miracle, such as curing the sick. The crowds, upon seeing it, suddenly convert and follow His teachings. On the other hand, there are biblical stories where the change occurs more slowly and includes some twists and turns. The conversion of Saint Paul is a case in point.

Before his conversion to Jesus, Paul was known as Saul of Tarsus (Turkey) and “worked for the total destruction of the Church” (Acts 8:3). Initially (as a complete zealot for Israel) he went from house to house, arresting Christian men and women and sending them to prison. He gained a reputation persecuting Christians in Jerusalem. On one occasion, he even took care of the cloaks of those who stoned St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and “totally approved of the killing” (Acts. 8:1).

The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of Saul’s conversion, which did not happen immediately, but rather, over a period of self-questioning. Acts recounts that Saul was traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus (Syria) seeking to destroy the Christians there. The story notes that when he heard the question: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (9:4), he began to seek a fuller understanding of this experience and his prior actions. However, Saul did not find answers for these questions until Ananias, a kind Christian, came to help him in

Damascus. Saul had been suddenly blinded, and had not taken any food or drink for three days. When a fearful Ananias showed Saul kindness and compassion, Saul regained his sight (9:18). From then on Saul found his answers more quickly. He attained new insight, was baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit and began preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Lord.

Saul’s new vision began with reflection on his experience and his encounter with the Lord in the midst of it. His reflection may easily have addressed these two questions: Why am I doing what I’m doing and does this make any sense? Your experience may not be as drastic as Saul’s, but it can have similar results. For example:

In terms of your volunteer experience so far,

- What new questions have been stirring within you?
- What new understandings of yourself, of the poor or of God have you been exploring since you began your service or began living with your community?
- What earlier views have you been reconsidering (concerning life, love, faith, career, politics, etc.)?

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Does the consumerist, overly consumptive culture surrounding the Christmas season frustrate you? If so, here are some helpful links from past issues of Shared Visions and other links from our website that can offer you alternative ways to approach this Christmas season.

1. “Joy of Giving” Activity of the Week - www.pallotticenter.org/Current/ActivityOfTheWeek/joy_of_giving.htm
2. “Five Ways to Simplify Your Christmas” Shared Visions Vol. 15, No. 2
www.pallotticenter.org/SharedVisions/Vol%2015%20No2/Vol%2015%20No.%202.pdf
3. “Alternative Giving Ideas” Shared Visions Vol. 13, No. 2 - www.pallotticenter.org/SharedVisions/Vol13No2.pdf
4. More Christmas-themed articles can be found in the Shared Visions archives.
www.pallotticenter.org/SharedVisions/midyear_discoveries.htm

Recipe for a Good Time: Chocolate Holiday Mousse

Do you feel the “buzz” this holiday season? If not, this recipe for chocolate mousse will get you buzzing in no time. Try it out for a community night, or when holiday guests are coming to visit.

INGREDIENTS

- 12 ounces bittersweet chocolate
OR
- 2 cups semi-sweet chips
- 3/4 cup very hot, very strong black coffee
- 6 eggs, separated plus 2 additional egg whites
- 4 tablespoons brandy (optional)

DIRECTIONS

Place chocolate in bowl of food processor or blender.

Pour in very hot coffee; process until chocolate melts and mixture is smooth. Add egg yolks, one at a time; process well after each addition. Add liquor, if using; process until blended. Transfer to large bowl. Beat egg whites in a large bowl until soft peaks form. Fold one-third of egg whites into chocolate mixture to soften. Fold in remainder of egg whites, just until combined. Spoon mixture into 6 large dessert glasses. Cover; refrigerate at least 2 hours or up to 1 day. Top with whipped cream, shaved chocolate and a Maraschino cherry when ready to serve. Makes six servings.

For larger or smaller batches, visit www.cdktitchen.com/recipes/recs/39/Chocolate_Mousse46106.shtml, where you can adjust the recipe to fit your needs.

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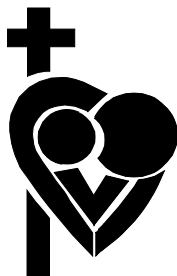
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The mission of the St. Vincent Pallotti Center

To promote lay volunteer service that challenges 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. Regional Pallotti Centers are located in Boston; St. Louis; and Oakland, CA. 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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