# Shared Visions

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


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## IN THIS ISSUE...How Goes the Job?

How goes the job? Anything you want to get off your chest? Anything not quite satisfactory with regard to your job placement and experience there? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you are not alone.

Typically most volunteers have been at their job placement for some time now. The "newness" of whole thing has worn off, and they find themselves in a challenging and at times difficult job. For some, the difficulty lies within the system, the way the work place is run. For others, the difficulty lies within trying to reach the people they serve. Volunteers find themselves carrying baggage home with them after a day at their work site. And unless the baggage is unpacked and processed, it piles up into one big mess. Allow us to facilitate some processing (both individual and within a group setting).

Evan Cuthbert (former Boston College IVP) writes about one of the stories he brought home from work, a story that reflects frustrations and difficulties that many volunteers face. Evan offers some insight into his experience and understanding of it.

Kathleen Kerr (Lasallian Volunteers) is mid-way through her first year at a Catholic Worker House. She takes us through some recent discoveries about the people she serves and her role in their lives.

We invite you to use the personal and group excercises to unload some emotions from the work place and perhaps uncover a way of handling them that suits you.

## A Vicious Cycle

*-Evan Cuthbert*
*Boston College IVP*

*Evan Cuthbert served two years, through the Boston College International Volunteer Program, at The Center for the Working Child in Tacna, Peru. He worked with the families of working boys and girls, children who by the age of seven or eight are shining shoes and out earning money to supplement their family's income. The Center's mission is to help these families through the day to day struggles brought on by their extreme poverty.*

One Sunday afternoon there was a knock at our door. I found 16 year old Teresa, the oldest daughter of one of the Center's families. Her eyes were red from crying and she looked exhausted. She told me that the night before her mother had taken her and her younger sisters and brother to sleep in the "pampa" (the desert floor). Their father had come home, become drunk again, and started to hit Maria, Teresa's mother. When he threatened the children, Maria took them and fled the house. They slept clumped together for the night, with nothing but blankets to protect them from the cold air and wind.

With their father still on his drinking binge the next day, the family could not return to their home. This was an all too familiar scenario for this family. Since arriving in Tacna a year earlier, I saw Maria and her children living in constant fear of this abusive man. My responsibilities at the Center included helping families work through

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## Helping or Enabling?

*-Kathleen Kerr*
*Lasallian Volunteers*

As a live-in staff person at the Holy Family Catholic Worker House in Kansas City, I find myself struggling over whether or not I am helping our guests or enabling them to remain destitute.

At the house, we serve dinner six days a week to 150-300 people a night. We have a shelter next door that houses up to four families, and we perform some social service work such as supplying bus tokens, finding shelter for homeless guests, helping pay for prescriptions and Greyhound tickets, and providing some clothing and hygiene materials.

"Gimme two bus tokens," says one of our guests with puckered lips and a street dog grumble.

"Why? Where do you need to go?"

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problems like this one. Previous attempts to help Maria realize and understand the abuse she was enduring had failed. I could only look on in frustration as they continued to live with him. Finally they were ready to take action. They said that they wanted out, and I wanted to help them get out.

After a long talk with Maria, I was sure that she was determined to break free of a relationship that was abusive and for years kept her family in constant terror. We spent the following day moving the family's few belongings from their small shack across town to an area unknown to her husband. We packed her things quickly, fearing that her husband would walk through the door. The day was stressful and difficult for both the family and me. But as I helped them start their new life, I felt renewed hope for the family. I knew that Maria had made the right decision and I knew they would sleep well for the first night in a long time.

Although my role in moving them away from Maria's husband was minor, it was satisfying. I had helped them take an important step, a step that had been necessary for a long time. Two days passed. Teresa arrived at the Center for breakfast. The second I saw her, I could tell something was wrong. "My Father is living with us again." I gritted my teeth as she explained that Maria had told her husband where they were staying. He showed up the night before, and she let him stay. "I'm not going back as long as he is there," she said stamping her foot. Although her frustration came from a far different place than mine, I was ready to burst.

For two days I felt the peace of knowing they had finally freed themselves from a vicious cycle, and now the cycle's engines were starting all over again. Despite her words, Maria was not as ready to be without her husband as she thought. This raised a number of questions for me. Like many volunteers, I had struggled and had come to terms with the fact that change is slow, especially when fighting economic poverty. I saw this family crisis as an opportunity for an immediate, constructive result of my services. Although I was saddened for the family and the pain I knew they would be enduring, I also felt that my own efforts to help had been undercut. Both Teresa and I felt burned by this; but I needed to step back and sort out the family's needs from my own. "What will I do if Maria comes to me again with the same problem? If I help her, will the same thing happen again?"

After praying over the recent experience with Maria and her family, I knew my answer would be, "Yes, I would help them again." I knew in my heart that what I had done was right. I had acted according to my conscience. Not to have acted on what I believed would have gone against my mission to serve.

The important thing was that Maria and her family had the Center. As volunteers there, our presence and support in their lives make the most difference. As long as Maria and her family have us and are not alone in their struggles, we are serving. One day Maria will be ready. And our recent experience of having taken a step together to break the cycle of abuse will allow the Center to better help her to know her heart and what is best for her family.

Our mission is to do the right thing, to do God's will. I know in my heart that if I continue to do what is right, change **will** take place. Change did indeed take place as I helped Maria's family in this horrible situation. It was a change that took place in me. I became a bit stronger, and more determined to do right. I remind myself often of an expression that I learned: You are called to, "be present, speak your truth, and let go of the result." ┼

## *...In Light of Scripture*

### Being Bread For The Hungry

Both of the volunteers' articles in this issue of Shared Visions tell a similar "letting go" story. Evan Cuthbert said he found he had to step back from the woman's choice to return to the abusive setting. He concluded that, although he couldn't always control the outcome of his efforts, he needed to "say his truth". Similarly, Kathleen Kerr also found her role to be a presence to the poor even if they misinterpret her motivations.

**For reflection and discussion**: Are there any times when you have been doing the work of your volunteer placement site, and decided to tell those you serve what you thought, even though there was a high probability they would reject what you were saying and believed?

**For reading aloud:** In the fourth gospel, John tells the story of Jesus, the "Bread of Life." Jesus tells his disciples that his flesh is bread indeed, and his blood is drink indeed.

> "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. The bread that I will give him is my flesh, which I give so that the world may live." This started an angry argument among

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"The doctor. My hip hurts."

"Do you have an appointment card?"

"Just gimme two bus tokens."

"No, I can't do it."

"We're friends, man, gimme two bus tokens!" he says as he wobbles like a spun top ready to fall on its side, and his road buddy stares down the alley and then looks at me with sympathetic, bloodshot eyes.

When I know that guests are trying to con me or use something we give them to trade for alcohol or drugs, I have an easier time saying "no" to them (although I still struggle with the fact that people have to ask or beg for basic necessities), yet sometimes they will get away with selling a coat we give them or finagling tokens from us for other purposes than they originally stated. This gives them some capital, in a sense, and some use it so they can be drunk or high for another day.

When I learn of these occurrences, it makes me wonder what is the purpose of our house and what is my purpose in it? If we didn't serve meals to the poor, would they be able to find food for themselves and their families? Would they become ill from improper clothing? Would they lose their jobs because we didn't give them bus tokens to get work one day when they didn't have any money?

The answer to these questions is an ambiguous 'maybe' with lingering thoughts of survival of the fittest surrounding it: Who's the strongest, the most clever, the best con, the best thief? Would complete desperation drive the so called "able poor" to seek employment to provide food, clothing, and shelter for themselves? What would fewer resources do to the unable poor - the physically and mentally ill? The problem with division lies in the creation of a modern notion of the worthy poor and the unworthy poor. This division exists in our society because some people are found to be more reproachable than others.

For example, alcoholism is a disease that affects people from every social class and most people would consent or feel safer with a group home for alcoholics in their neighborhood than one for crack addicts or for persons coming out of correctional facilities; alcoholics are more "worthy" of help than criminals. With this attitude, what happens to the people deemed unworthy of resources or help?

In contemporary society, most of us live for our own individual well being and this is seen in the materialism and lack of moralism in the rich as well as the poor. Living at a Catholic Worker House has given me the chance to stand against the greed and egocentricity that American history has forcefully instilled in its people.

By living in the middle of poverty, we give a presence of community (a safe place to gather and eat). Our guests know that we live this lifestyle by choice not necessity which makes a difference in our motivations. However, by continually being a presence and providing for the poor, it shows them that not everyone lives for money, material objects, and social status. It is possible for them to see a higher good, a good that has a fundamental concern for others. All people have an identity through Christ and we want to serve them and share with them as brothers and sisters.

Whether or not our guests see this or change their behavior because of our services or friendship is a good question, yet the answer would only provide a few success stories. We are servants to a herd of lost sheep and if one of us or one of our guests finds pasture, we have something to be thankful for.

Sometimes it is possible to figure out whether or not you're helping people or enabling them, yet this takes judgement, and judgement only comes from working with the poor in their communities and coming to know their personalities and habits. Most of the time we probably will not be able to distinguish between enabling and helping, but this is a reality that volunteers will have to face. I would rather have faith in God or Truth or Love (whatever you want to call a higher force) and be a fool with compassion than a person who gives up the active pursuit for equality and justice.

## From Christmas to Epiphany

*December is the darkest month*
*for volunteers who struggle.*
*And ask: "Where is the change I make?*
*This all seems such a muddle."*

*At Christmas time, there's gifts galore*
*for those who can afford it.*
*But in the hearts of those in need,*
*it's daybreak that they long for.*

*In church today, big time all sing,*
*in praise of Christ's arrival.*
*But look beyond, three kings do come,*
*The Rising Son approaching.*

*From Christmas to Epiphany,*
*from birth to mission outreach,*
*We're called to share His love with all*
*His light to brighten darkness.*

The feast of the Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of God's love to and in the diversity of all peoples, represented by the three kings. In Rome, since 1836 when St. Vincent Pallotti initiated a widely attended 8-day celebration of the Epiphany, there are to this day liturgies highlighting non-Latin rites, inviting all peoples to celebrate our unity amid diversity.

# What's Happenin'?

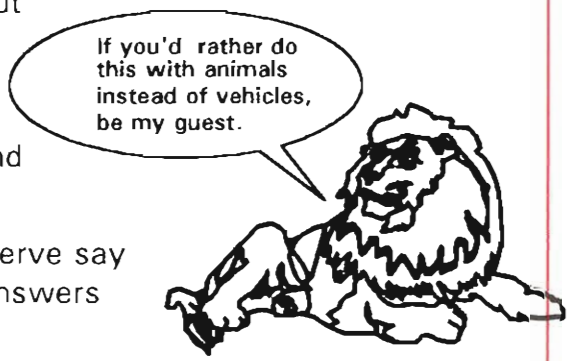
**Part One: Working individually, complete each sentence that begins, "With regard to my work..." by circling the word that is closest to your situation.**

| With regard to my work... | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| I feel appreciated | often | sometimes | never |
| I see positive, concrete results from my efforts | often | sometimes | never |
| I have difficult decisions to make | often | sometimes | never |
| I find myself frustrated | often | sometimes | never |
| I utilize my community as an outlet for talking out frustrations | often | sometimes | never |

**Part Two: Still working individually, answer the following questions.**

What vehicle most accurately describes how you feel when you are on the job? (Remember, there are a ton of vehicles out there... bicycle, tractor, ambulance...) Refer to your answers from **Part One** in making a selection. Be specific (age, color, make and model.)

What vehicle would the people you serve say describes you? Again, try to use your answers from **Part One** in making a selection.




**Part Three: Now come together to share as a community.**

- Together share your responses to **Part Two**. Each community member take a turn. Reveal which vehicle you selected and briefly describe why you selected it. After everyone has taken their turn, go back to the first person and ask clairifying questions to further explain his or her choice.
- Do the same for the vehicle you think the people you serve would choose for you. Again, after everyone has taken a turn, go back to the first person and clairify.
- Choose one of the phrases you concluded in **Part One** that best reflects how you're feeling about your job. Share it with your community and explain why.

## What Difference Does Your Work Make?

In both Evan's and Kathleen's articles, we see that each concluded with their understanding of purpose with regard to their volunteer placement. How are your efforts serving others? How is your work making a difference? Tell your community members. Not all of us can see the difference from our efforts, so invite your community members to help you.

# Do any of these *Volunteers' Voices* sound familiar?

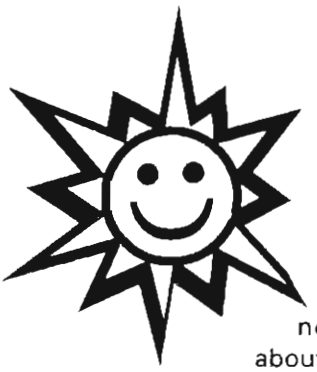
"The women in the drop-in day shelter stop and make me think when they say things like, 'What can you possibly know about my life to help me? Have *you* ever lived in a shelter? You have no idea what my life is all about. You're just some rich kid from another world and I can't trust you.'"

"Every morning I dress 89 year old Mrs. Linnley, make her breakfast, give her medication, and put in her hearing aids, and every morning she sends me out of her room without so much as a thank you."

"There is so much need here, so much that we could be doing for the people. I am surrounded by children in bare feet. And as winter approaches, I know that we just don't have the money in our budget to buy them shoes."

"Four days before Thanksgiving our food bank had 500 turkeys donated to it. I worked overtime calling all of our agencies trying to get the turkeys out to people who needed them. I spent so much time pushing papers and trying to beat the clock that I didn't even have a chance to leave my desk and see the people I was working so hard to help out."

"At first I was really psyched to teach Reading and Math this year at an inner-city school. Little did I know I'd be spending half of my time babysitting the kids instead of teaching them.I feel more like a police warden."



"My job and everything about it is absolutely nifty. Each aspect of my job is going swimingly; and I never feel frustrated about anything at all. It's just grand."

**For Personal Reflection:**

Which of the above quotations comes closest to expressing your experience?
If none of the above quotations speaks for you, take a moment to compose your own.

**For Group Sharing:**

Give each person the chance to read aloud the quote which refelcts what he or she commonly experiences. Share among yourselves how this quote fits your experience and how you generally handle it. What suggestions can your community members offer you?

*"In Light of Scripture" continued from page 3*

them. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" they asked. Jesus said to them: "I am telling you the truth. . . ." (Chapter 6: 51-53).

Many of his followers heard this and said, "This teaching is too hard. Who can listen to it?" (6:60)

Jesus knew this was difficult and asked them: "Does this make you want to give up?" (6:61)

Because of this, many of Jesus' followers turned back and would not go with him anymore. (6:66)

**For reflection and discussion:** To what extent do you think it is inevitable that we will "turn off" some of the people we are trying to serve? That they will find what we are telling them too hard and impossible for them to listen to?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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, NJ, Saint Louis. A new Center will be opening soon in northern California. 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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