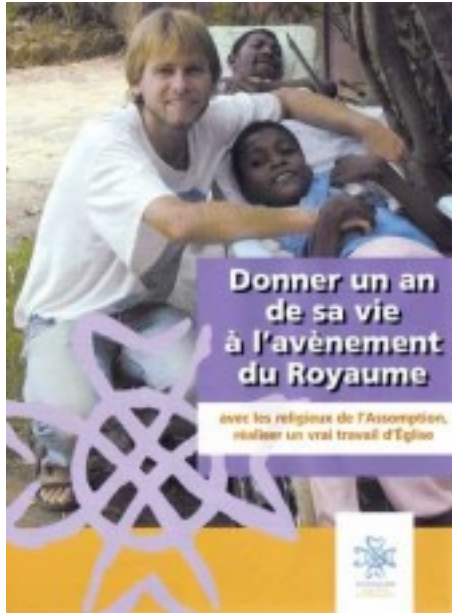


by Katie Mulembe, Membership and Recruitment Coordinator, Catholic Volunteer Network



(editor's note: The Assumptionists, both in the United States¹ and abroad,² are committed to offering young people opportunities to live and work with³ Assumptionist communities throughout the world. In the United States, the community has joined forces with its female counterpart, the Religious of the Assumption, in support of AMA, Associate Missionaries of the Assumption <http://www.assumptionvolunteers.org> . Young men have lived in Assumptionist communities in Tanzania, Worcester, Mexico City, Manila, and elsewhere. The⁴ Assumptionists in France⁵ have also organized an active volunteer program http://www.assomption.org/totale_jeunes.php which offers volunteer sites in Paris, Romania, Jerusalem, Quebec, etc.)

Over the last few decades, many religious communities have made a deliberate effort to open their doors to the laity. This is particularly visible in our network of volunteer programs, where it is not unusual to find vowed religious living in community with lay volunteers and missionaries. This lifestyle puts into practice the vision that Pope Benedict XVI calls the “new missionary age in the Church,” one in which believers of every vocation fully embrace their baptismal call as partners in the mission of the Church.

The unique experience of living with a religious community can have a deep impact on the life of a lay volunteer. Catherine Drennan, Catholic Volunteer Network’s Recruitment Associate, had the experience of living with a religious community while serving with the Christian Brothers Lay

Volunteer Program in New Orleans.

Catherine says “While living in community with three religious brothers, I gained a sense of purpose and spirituality in my mission work that I otherwise would have been missing if I had not lived in community with them. Each morning we would join for prayer before going off to work- this ritual not only calmed me but also prepared me for what was to come during the day. After each day, having a community of people to come home to who understood my work, supported me, and pushed me to work harder and make more thoughtful conclusions about the meaning of life is something that I will always take with me.”

There is no question about the richness of the community living experience and it is easy to see the potential advantages of a mixed community of religious and lay volunteers when it is done well. Volunteers often bring a new energy and enthusiasm to the community, and vowed religious bring spiritual depth, wisdom, and a wealth of experience in ministry. However, this setting can also create much tension and discomfort for all involved. There are many reasons for this – age differences, cultural diversity, differing lengths of commitment to the community, even different sleep schedules. Adequate preparation and open dialogue are critical components of any thriving community. Here are some tips you may find helpful if your program places lay volunteers in community with vowed religious.

Outline expectations.

There are a few different models that programs can follow in order to create a healthy community. It is important to have a clear outline of community expectations to avoid unnecessary confusion and tension. One model calls for the religious and the volunteers to fully function as one solid community. This means that both groups take part in all community meetings, prayer/devotions, as well as share meals, common spaces, and household responsibilities. Another model is where volunteers and religious share a living space, but function as two separate communities co-existing within one space. Finally, there is also a combination of these two models; where volunteers and religious have some independence, but also have regular, shared commitments. No one model is better than the other; it is simply a matter of identifying what works best for each community.

Create an atmosphere of openness right from the start.

Prior to the volunteer's arrival, it is important that the permanent community have at least one meeting about the program. The coordinator of the volunteer program should take time to share the vision and history of the program, explain the nature of the service that the volunteers will engage in and the length of time they will be a part of the community. Allow ample time for all community members to express their concerns and have their questions answered. If the

permanent community is on the same page, it is more likely that the volunteers will feel warmly welcomed into the community.

You may also consider bringing up the topic of community living early on, even during the application process. Use this conversation to help you assess the applicant's openness and flexibility, rather than their knowledge of community practices. It is also helpful to give the applicants the opportunity to ask questions about their living arrangements prior to accepting the placement. Initiating these conversations early on will set the tone for open dialogue throughout the volunteer's year of service.

Celebrate commonalities.

Although lay volunteers and vowed religious may have a many differences – it is likely all members of the community found themselves in the same place for similar reasons. One idea for a community activity is to reflect on the mission statements of the congregation and the volunteer program. Have the community share about their common goals and the words in the statement that speak to them. This sharing will help the community build trust and unity.

Speak honestly about vocations.

Our most recent Membership Survey Report indicated that 1.9 percent of long-term volunteers chose to enter religious life after their term of service was completed. Although 1.9 percent is a small fraction, this is still an encouraging figure in a time when religious vocations are dwindling. The year of service is often a very formative time for volunteers and many discover their life calling or career path during this time. However, it is important to encourage the vowed members of the community to approach the topic of vocations gently. Introducing the subject right away may make the volunteers uneasy and reluctant. Instead, give the volunteers time to adjust to this new life and build trust with their community members. Allow them to learn about the charism of the congregation through participation, rather than explanation. The conversations will continue more naturally as time goes by.

We truly believe that our model of community living is what sets Catholic Volunteer Network members apart from the many full-time service programs available today. We look forward to working together to enrich this component of our programs. If you have suggestions or stories you would like to share on this topic, please email them to Katie Mulembe at kmulembe@catholicvolunteernetwork.org.

For more information on this subject, see our Lay Mission Handbook, Religious and Lay Volunteers Living Together: The Challenges of Community, Commitment and Collaboration by Maleita Gousie Olson.