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Unaffiliated Lay Vincentians’ Understanding and Engagement with the Vincentian Mission: Focus Group Findings

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In November 2014, the Office of Mission and Values of DePaul University commissioned CARA to conduct a series of focus groups that would explore more deeply some of the key findings from a 2014 CARA survey entitled “Unaffiliated Lay Vincentians’ Informal Engagement with the Vincentian Mission.”

CARA designed a protocol, which was designed to draw out further discussion from the key findings of the 2014 report. The Office of Mission and Values contacted young adults between the ages of 18-35 who have had a formative experience in the Vincentian mission in some capacity, either as a student or as a post-graduate volunteer at a Vincentian institution, to invite them to participate in a focus group. In March and June 2015, a researcher from CARA conducted four focus groups, which varied in size between five and ten participants. Two focus groups were held in Chicago, one in New York City, and one in Denver, Colorado.

The purpose of the focus groups was to learn more about the impact of the volunteer experience on the subsequent lives of the participants, their interest in additional Vincentian activities, and the challenges or obstacles that might prevent their further involvement. A secondary goal was to explore the religiosity of the former volunteers, their current connection to the Catholic Church, and their interest, if any, in Church service as a priest, brother, sister, deacon, or lay parish minister.

Key Findings

- Alumni of Catholic volunteer programs are an untapped resource for the Catholic Church in the United States. Their volunteer experiences of common living,
reflective prayer, and service to the poor stand out as one of the key formative influences in their lives.

- The focus group participants unanimously expressed a desire to continue their connections with other former Vincentian volunteers. They suggested spiritual discernment and faith formation programs, online and in-person opportunities to build community, and short-term, group-based service projects as possible ways to do this.

- At the same time, participants also described aspects of their lives that limit or inhibit their potential for involvement in such activities. Among these barriers to future involvement mentioned by focus group participants were a shortage of time, the competition of other responsibilities, and the difficulty of finding Vincentian community and service opportunities in other cities.

- Focus group participants described the prayer and community life they experienced while serving as volunteers as transformative in their lives. They express a deep desire to find similar experiences in the larger Church.

- All of the participants knew of one or more volunteers who were seriously considering a vocation to priesthood or the religious life during their time of volunteer service. Several admitted that they themselves had been discerning such a vocation. For the most part, however, the volunteers did not actually enter a seminary or novitiate.
Introduction

In November 2014, the Office of Mission and Values of DePaul University commissioned CARA to conduct a series of focus groups that would explore more deeply some of the key findings from a 2014 CARA survey entitled “Unaffiliated Lay Vincentians’ Informal Engagement with the Vincentian Mission.”

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In March and June 2015, a researcher from CARA conducted four focus groups, which varied in size between five and ten participants. Two focus groups were held in Chicago, one in New York City, and one in Denver, Colorado. One of the two Chicago groups had only female participants; the other Chicago group and the New York group were predominantly female, with only one or two male participants. This gender ratio reflects the ratio in the original DePaul survey, in which 78 percent of the respondents were female. The Denver group, in contrast, was evenly balanced, with five male and five female participants. The Denver participants were also somewhat older than those in the other groups, averaging in their early thirties.

The purpose of the focus groups was to learn more about the impact of the volunteer experience on the subsequent lives of the participants, their interest in additional Vincentian activities, and the challenges or obstacles that might prevent their further involvement. A secondary goal was to explore the religiosity of the former volunteers, their current connection to the Catholic Church, and their interest, if any, in Church service as a priest, brother, sister, deacon, or lay parish minister.

Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes, and began with an introductory presentation on the background of the study as an outgrowth of the 2014 survey. The CARA researcher then followed a standardized protocol of questions categorized under four topics: the impact of the volunteer experience, interest in future Vincentian activities, challenges to volunteer service/commitment, and current religious involvement. See Appendix A for a copy of the Interview Protocol.
The Impact of the Volunteer Experience

The first question asked the participants in each focus group to describe how they had been changed by their volunteer experience. While some participants initially resisted answering this question, saying that there was *no* aspect of their lives that had *not* been profoundly affected, most readily cited impacts on their choice of a post-college career, on how they acted in their current professions, and on their prayer life.

**Impacts on Career Choice**

Several participants in the various groups mentioned that they had changed their career plans after their college or post-college Vincentian volunteer experiences. A few participants, while not changing careers, had nevertheless developed specific preferences for the kind of organization in which to practice their career.

*It really helped me to understand the Vincentian mission of service and justice and kind of took me from a place where I felt like with my communication degree I was highly qualified to be a secretary or a housewife, and then I felt like after that I could see a path of social service work that could lead me down. So that was what led me to do the second volunteer experience that I did at Mercy Home and that is what then led me to pursue a career in social services.* – Chicago A

*I kind of came in [as a freshman] thinking I knew what I wanted to do. I was like, “I’m going to be a computer programmer. I’m going to do this.”... I [graduated] not knowing what I was going to do, but I knew something had happened. Kind of like a journey had formed from that. It’s kind of led me – fast forward to now. I lived last year in a hospitality house in Uptown. I’m still involved with them. It’s like my second year with them – kind of like an internship kind of thing. I’m finishing up grad school for Theology.* – Chicago A

*I came from a business background, and so, was in a fast paced, big money job and, just, got burned out, and uh, was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. And I think CVV allowed me to pursue, I think, what I was always called to do and what was always in my heart. But I kind of, like, I was denying that, for a long time, and so—so it definitely, many memories and, that’s why it’s so huge.* – Denver
I went back to a place to work at where I would get to live out that Vincentian approach to work and service, wanting to come back to Chicago, I knew that there were very few organizations that I was willing to come back and work for. A huge part of that was that I wanted it to be connected to the Vincentian mission somehow. – Chicago B

**Adopting the Vincentian Perspective**

Even if the volunteer experience had not led them to change careers, participants were unanimous in saying that their experiences had changed how they approached their careers. Several mentioned that the volunteer experience had led them to focus more on systemic change and on the structures which perpetuate poverty.

*I think for myself service that had kind of been a very direct service like soup kitchens or tutoring or things like that didn’t lend itself much to questions of why is something happening or there’s more impactful changes that could happen. ... I volunteer with Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, so we do lobbying around different advocacy issues with homelessness and housing and security in the city. And that’s also a part of my own job now as a caseworker around housing issues. So I feel like it’s a good medium of direct service work for people who are in those dire straits and needing help but then also asking bigger questions of why is a person homeless in the first place.* – Chicago A

*I went back to grad school after going to Kenya the second time. I decided to study public policy in large part due to my time in Kenya—thinking about systemic change as opposed to just volunteerism or doing social work or counseling. Those are other tracks that I had thought about. Kenya really made me start to think about systems and how systems of oppression function. I became really interested in policy work and so went back to school for policy all in large part thanks to my time in Kenya with the VLM.* – Chicago B

*But now, we live in suburbia and I have four kids and I drive a minivan (laughs). I mean I feel like in a lot of ways, just like everyone else. But in some ways it’s very lonely. I go to places. I just had a friend from Church invite me to an “our bond.” It’s, health, and then, cosmetics, and I didn’t really care about her, and I’m sitting there and sitting there and thinking about “This product costs more than what the people that we’re working with in Africa make in a whole six months.” You know? So, on the outside I feel like I look the same as everyone else but it’s totally changed my heart.* – Denver
Others felt that their experience made them able to witness to Vincentian values and to a larger social justice consciousness in their current profession.

[O]nce I began actually teaching and being a teacher, it really cemented for me this idea of my call to help students. For the last three years I have been a service homeroom teacher, which means I actually lead students at my school on different service trips and different experiences. It is my way of infusing the Vincentian mission into a school that is not Vincentian. … I myself personally include the idea of reflection into the service experiences that my students are doing. Oftentimes, in many cases, even in Catholic schools, it’s more like, “Okay, let’s just do, but let’s not really think about why we are doing.” “Where is our faith in what we are doing?” I really try to instill that into my students so that they have that piece as well. – New York

I like to think that I bring some dignity to the banking world. [Laughter] Just a little bit, especially when my manager is ready to kick someone out because they’re negative four or five hundred dollars instead of helping them try to find a solutions. I’m just like, “No. We can do this. We’ll figure this out. I’m going to call the social worker, because they can’t communicate with me or you. And you’re just frustrated so that’s why you’re kicking them out, not because we don’t have a solution for them.” … I feel like I wouldn’t have the backbone to – or the facts and figures or experience behind me – if I hadn’t seen what I saw in the Vincent and Louise House. - Chicago A

Because [we had the experience of] living with ten people and not making much money, and [we are] working downtown even though we also live in suburbia. In our group of friends, we kind of bring that Vincentian edge that otherwise I don’t think people would see in suburbia, where people don’t come downtown ever and their kids roll up the windows when they see that someone’s holding a sign and things like that. And I think that there’s a value in our presence, in our own identity, whether it’s spoken that way or not. – Denver

**Impacts on Relationships**

Still other participants stated that their volunteer experiences had influenced how they related to others, both to their co-workers and to those they served.

*For me, the VITAL experience and all my experiences at St. John’s, dealing specifically with the Vincentian mission, helped me to really look at how I treat*
people, both those I am serving and [those I am] in service with and also understanding the purpose of what I am doing and how it is a part of God’s plan. – New York

I think in my work but mostly in my worldview and in how I interact with others. It’s how you have that one-on-one interaction and how you approach people and how you approach people’s situations because you are able to see their humanity and their struggles and help be partners with them and not to see the separation, but to see the likeness more than anything. – Chicago B

I also studied social work in college, and came right to CVV from that track, and I think probably the biggest shift—I always knew I was gonna be in a service-oriented field, but maybe that the big shift is that like I wasn’t always the helper. Like – I too was benefitting, so to put a name on that, there was a reciprocal relationality that was never talked about in Social Work. Like “You don’t have relationship you have boundaries,” and you have all these things, and it starts to get really muddy when you start – mucking around. And to really spend a lot of time thinking about that and praying about that, and bringing some of those things to life. About how hard it is to maintain those boundaries and like, why those separations exist and things like that. I think that really rocked the perspective I came in with – in, in knowing how to serve the poor. – Denver

Since I am in a managerial role, I do not have as much direct interaction with our guests as much. Our interns do all the time, and I realized the other day that I spent 45 minutes listening to a man that had previously been in a mental institution. At the end of the 45 minutes, if an intern had done that, they probably think, “This was a waste of my time. I just didn’t understand anything he was talking about.” But talking about it with my supervisor, and she told me that I had just provided a service of being there and listening. That’s something that I did not think of. It’s my day-to-day job. It’s my job to listen to somebody speak for 45 minutes about something that doesn’t make sense. It’s something I believe that needs to be there regardless, being mindful of how I can do that even when I am not aware. – Chicago B

**Impact on Prayer**

Finally, the participants felt that their volunteer experiences had had a profound impact on their prayer lives and on the prayers of their spouses and children. They also said that they
were now more likely to see an inextricable link between their service activities and their relationship with God.

I plan liturgy for the 5pm Sunday night Mass. I do lots of that fun stuff. I pick the music, and I write reflections for the choir, you know. And I am having a hard time remembering a time when I wrote a reflection that didn’t involve [words] like “and that means our challenge is...” or “our call as Christ’s body, as Christ’s hands and voice.” I can’t remember a time when – I know that that existed obviously back before Vincent and Louise and Vincentian, you know in my life, before that changed me. But, in my own prayer, and coming to terms with realizing that we’re all parts of a body, the body of Christ. You know, we all have different functions and do different things and taking comfort in that as well. – Chicago A

I see how my prayers changed most in my children, because there are certain family rituals that I took from my family growing up, and we do them with my kids. When I was growing up we always prayed the Our Father and then God Bless me, and then God Bless everyone we could think of. And my children do that now, too. But my children pray every night for everyone without a home, everyone who’s hungry, and everyone who’s sick, which I didn’t pray for as a child. And I know that’s partly the CVV influence. – Denver

Service work was not something that was a part of my faith growing up, so the first time I was introduced to service and Catholicism was through a Vincentian lens. For me, it was doing Vincentian service that brought service into my faith life at all. And now, I couldn’t imagine my faith without the service, because at this point they are so integrated, serving people and having that be my expression of faith and religion and spirituality. I don’t know what my faith would look like right now if I hadn’t found the Vincentians. – Chicago B

Overall, their volunteer experiences have had a profound influence on all aspects of the participants’ lives, at the key age when they were in the process of choosing their future. As one participant put it:

I think being in your early to mid-20s is a moment in which you are becoming an adult, figuring out who you are. I am not really sure the kind of person I would have been had I not chosen to do service work. Maybe I would have been a fine person. I am sure I wouldn’t have been a terrible person. [Laughter]. But my life would not have been the way that I interact with people and talk to people. The choices that I make and what I buy and what I do, would be very different if I hadn’t had that lens handed to me at the age of 22, which was older than a lot of
other people even. Even if I never did volunteer work again, I would still be a Vincentian. You kind of can’t shake it once you have that lens placed in front of you. – Chicago B

Interest in Future Vincentian Activities

The profound impact of their volunteer experiences is shown in the values expressed by the participants. As a result, they desire future Vincentian activities that would help them live out these values: for community connection, for prayer together and spiritual formation in the Vincentian Charism, and for opportunities to serve together and to reflect on that service.

Expressing Life Values

A desire for present-day community experiences similar to those of the participants’ volunteer service was the most commonly-cited value. The participants were unanimous in stating that the friendships they had formed during their volunteer experiences are still their most valued friendships today. Several also noted that they had met and formed relationships with persons they would never have been friends with otherwise, and that these diverse friendships had enriched their lives.

I might be just still coming off my V&L high, but I don’t associate—like, I have co-workers—but I don’t associate with people that don’t have the Vincentian background. [Laughter] I don’t have close friends that didn’t go to DePaul or didn’t live with me. – Chicago A

That was one of the biggest fears for me in graduating. “Where was I going to have community like the one I had at St. John’s, specifically the Vincentian community that I had formed?” There was always that fear and even now – how many years am I out – I graduated 4 years ago. My graduate experience is not like my undergrad experience. That’s just something that can’t be when you’re working full time. What I miss and I still do is just not having people there. – New York

I think most of the people that you meet, even in really casual encounters, that you meet through CVV are just incredible people. I think everybody kind of, said exactly what I feel about relationship: genuineness, authentic, you know. There is a realization that you’re not so far removed from these people. ... I think that’s
what I take away. The connectedness. The connectedness despite the difference. At least the outward difference. Like [Name] is from Louisiana and we’re really good friends, you know? Seven years ago I don’t think you could’ve said that we were going to be really good friends. – Denver

I have made great friends with people, who if I had met them through something outside the Vincentian, probably would not be friends. I would maybe put up with them, socialize with them, but you know it just kind of brings you together in a different way. – Chicago B

The participants noted that their previous Vincentian friendships were useful in networking when arriving in a new city, and also helped them share their joys and frustrations. This was especially true for some of the Denver participants, who were somewhat older and had worked longer in their demanding social service professions.

That’s exactly how I made my first friend in Denver when I moved here too. A girl I volunteered with connected me with another girl who lives here from another year in my program and we’re closest friends now because we have that bond or that realization of sharing it with something larger than yourself. – Denver

And then, in this community. Like, this is home for me. Because I can share about the struggles, here. ... Sometimes, to serve the poor is really hard. But I can share, share that struggle here, where I can’t share that struggle elsewhere, because I know the people here love those people as I do. – Denver

I think something ... that really stands out to me is just being part of a community, like others have been saying. Having people to talk to. I think in a lot of things I’ve done after CVV I’ve really burned out, in one thing after another. Like I really burned out working at the hospital. I feel really like, [I have] spent a lot in my current job, and I think a big, a key thing is a community. Having people to talk to that share your values and can relate to the frustrations of working with people. – Denver

Finally, the role of community in prayer was valued:

For me, it is the community prayer and really just the conversation and awareness of issues. ... Praying for things that not everyone is necessarily praying about and for and having that kind of mindset. That’s just me, don’t get me wrong, having those service opportunities would be really great too, but for me it’s really the community and prayer. – New York
Desires for Future Activities

The kinds of Vincentian activities desired by the focus group participants flowed from the values they wished to continue to experience in their lives today. They suggested opportunities for ongoing community formation and connection, for prayer and faith formation in the Vincentian tradition, and for engaging in service activities together. At the same time, however, they realized that there were difficulties in creating and making use of such opportunities.

The groups spent much time discussing the ways stronger and more widespread community connections might be created and fostered among Vincentian alumni.

_I would love if there was some kind of group to join, but not necessarily affiliated with St. John’s specifically ... Something bigger than that, with a larger Vincentian connect, but there kind of isn’t. That would be great, and a lot of my friends and family would be interested in that._ – New York

_I have been pestering the Daughters for the longest time to form a lay affiliate group. I know a lot of different groups of sisters have lay groups that are just connected to them, where you can go and eat dinner and pray and serve and all that wonderful stuff._ – Chicago A

_With today’s technology, it would be nice to have some [kind] of central alumni or current volunteer network or cloud-based system to connect and share. This [could be some sort of] communal blog and you can find people. At least that’s a good way to find community again and create opportunities again and connect._ – Chicago B

Such communities would be especially valued as locations and opportunities for prayer together:

_I think that it is so easy to find the volunteer opportunities. I think that it is difficult to find the intentional prayer opportunities. That takes a lot commitment and trial and error, sometimes, especially after graduating … _– Chicago B

_I think about the years that I’ve worked in service and those folks who don’t have it [community reflection and discussion] in their lives, they’ve really gotten hardened and pretty cynical. I think that’s a big thing they miss. … but if there was a program that was powerful that could get me to pray and get me to reflect and look at where I am now in my life, then, that would be awesome. And it would build community. Because it’s difficult._ – Denver
When I think about things that could be provided for former volunteers, they would be opportunities to have community that aren’t really connected to formal religion, so that people who maybe aren’t as involved in a formal religion could still have an opportunity to talk about their work and their experiences and service. Because I think it’s all part of the big picture. Maybe somebody doesn’t formally pray or go to church but are still involved in service and appreciate the values. – Denver

Spiritual discernment opportunities and programs for faith formation were especially cited:

I kind of feel that in my experience of being a Vincentian, it kind of undid a lot of my early teaching of my religion ... I was still in the middle of that when I was graduating, and I haven’t managed to tie the loose ends back up. So I feel like I probably could have used some – I’m three, four years out now and I’m still trying to tie up some loose ends. I can’t go home. I can’t go back to where I was, but I need to figure out where I’m moving forward to. So that’s something that would be helpful. – Chicago A

What I would like to see is formation for families. Because I love sharing that with my children. And I love that my children, every time they see someone on the street, they ask “Mommy, do we have something? They need something.” They have a heart for people in need. I love that. And so, I would love to see more of that. In my parish, we have formation for young children, in ways that... families are formed. I would love to see that within the Vincentian family. For me it’s really important to share that with our children, because this is home for me, and I want this to be home for my children too. – Denver

Short-term, group-based service opportunities, too, were greatly desired:

The service is so key. Specifically, I have always found that in being a Vincentian – there are people around this room – there is something that specifically speaks to them at their heart, which is the most important issue of the world or the most important thing that they are really searching to help find or to help fix. I think that’s really key, whatever you do in service make sure that it directly correlates to what you’re passionate about and where you most think you are meant to serve. Finding a group like that would be ideal. – New York

Yeah, a lot of people want to have these [service] experiences. One of the great things I did was, I did a program sponsored by Franciscan sisters in Central America. It was as a global awareness through experience. It was great. So I went to Guatemala for ten days and I didn’t do any volunteer work. I met people
and heard people’s stories. I learned about what was going on there, and really witnessed a 30-year tragedy that had happened there. So experiences like that, where you provide people an opportunity, within the confines of their job when all they can get is a week off work. And just be in solidarity with people, learn from people, listen to people, live with people. Rather than building a house or a church or a pre-school. Those are the kinds of international experiences I’ve taken the most from. You could have it has a domestic experience as well. – Denver

The participants mentioned a few current examples of the kinds of programs they desired, and asked that these be expanded or replicated elsewhere:

I know that there’s a thing at the parish, where every third Sunday anyone who’s spent time in service meets for dinner and talks about their experience. And that’s something that they do every third Sunday. Father [Name] noticed a need and made that available. I don’t go to that because I haven’t done a year of service. – Chicago A

I know that with CVV, [Name], one of the directors, has done a great job of creating little reunions among CVV volunteers - Colorado Vincentian volunteers - when he does his recruitment trail around the states, he also comes to Chicago and says, “Hey Chicago CVV alums, let’s all get together to talk and reflect.” That’s one [of] him to do. It’s like, how do we do it as adults who are responsible for doing that ourselves too? – Chicago B

CVV does a great job after you’ve done the year, then you’re done and you become part of the alumni community. They have Mass and dinner every Monday and it’s open to the community. And a lot of the time it’s former volunteers or people who contributed to the organization in some way, shape, or form. And so that is your way to reconnect to your year, your time, you know. You get to see volunteers now and remember what it was like a little bit. See places where you’re in the kitchen, having conversations, you’re playing games, you’re doing whatever. I think there is a strong sense of community. – Denver

Over the summer, I was a part of the VLM. I really found a Vincentian community outside of St. John’s. It’s very supportive. There’s retreat every fall ... When you are a part of the VLM program, you make this commitment – not put on paper but for yourself – that you want to be a part of the program and always be connected to the people that you served in Kenya. Whether it is going back or trying to find different projects to start up. Our retreat in October was a post-service retreat, which also focused on projects that the sisters wanted us to start there. ...That’s
pretty exciting that that's happening, not just St. John's but nationwide. – New York

In summary, the participants valued all aspects of their volunteer program, and wished there was an organized process that would combine service, prayer and community experiences for alumni.

[Something to] connect all those people under one umbrella, to have a social aspect, a prayer aspect, a service aspect to kind of keep in motion all of the formation that we've had as students at DePaul or as people who have done service programs, to kind of keep that moving after the college or post-grad service has ended. – Chicago A

Participant: ... just a way to say that this is something I am going to bring out into the world through my life with and whatever I am doing, some kind of commitment I can make that is in a recognized way, feeling like I have that community where I go of other people that have committed to that in different ways. I don’t know if I am necessarily looking for...

Facilitator: Like a pledge or something?

Participant: I’m thinking more like an actual commitment of “I’m doing this, working on a project.” Even if it is a whole year or two year project that you’re working on, it is something that will eventually come to fruition through the work that you do with other people. If you made that commitment, it doesn’t require a due next week, it can be a process that you have over time to do and to commit to.

– New York

Barriers to Involvement

At the same time, however, participants recognized that there were barriers and difficulties that hindered their involvement. One of these was the simple shortage of time and the competition of other responsibilities:

We constantly get questions of, “Oh, what do you have for alumni?” But to your point, sometimes we will plan things and people will say, “Oh, that’s such a great idea, but I can’t make it.” Or “How about you plan this ...” and then we go plan it, and they’re not able to make it. The reality of what people are able to do versus—I know they love that connection, but I don’t know what would bring people together. It has to be very easy to come to and be involved in. We haven’t figured it out yet, but I definitely hear that a lot. -- New York
I kind of wonder if, because so many of our alumni get hired on to the places where they were working, or go to school, or work in ministry. And in any of those scenarios you have a really weird schedule. And so if you’re working in a hospital and you work overnight, or if you’re going to school and you have classes and a job, or if you have four kids. That’s not to say it’s not a great program, but I think just the circumstances of where people end up after a year like this is they’re strapped for money and they’re strapped for time.  – Denver

I feel like it’s hard since I work with now in advertising. I used to work in theatre. Choosing a path that is not directly related to the social services for a career, at least at this stage of the game, finding that time outside of work and outside of direct relationship obligations to make a commitment to service or to a project or to an organization, can be hard to find one that is compatible that also still is fulfilling for what I want to be doing. – Chicago B

Others cited the difficulty of finding suitable opportunities, especially if they had moved some distance away from the Vincentian university they had previously attended, or from the service opportunities they had previously been involved in:

Participant: Even just listening to this, it feels like sometimes if people go places, if there is a way for people to know how to connect. ... it’s disheartening a little bit. How do you just let people who are interested know who to connect with? Do you have to find a St. Vincent DePaul society? Do you have to find the Daughters? Where do you go?

Participant: It’s funny that you said that because I was bored the other day, and I went on the St. Vincent DePaul society website to see where they have chapters in [the state the participant is moving to], and they’re all on the other side of [State]. It’s like a four or five hour drive from where I will be.  – New York

And it’s harder to stay connected when you don’t live in the same place with people that I shared that experience with. – Denver

Still others expressed dissatisfaction with various aspects of the current, long-established service opportunities:

The Daughters keep telling me, “Oh, there’s the St. Vincent DePaul Society. You need to go join that.” I tried to join it when I moved away from school. And it scared them how much I knew about St. Vincent. [Laughter] And I was a little too Vincentian for the St. Vincent DePaul Society. [Laughter] ... When I first moved out to [Place], I went to one of the citywide meetings because I was still parish shopping and trying to find my parish home. And it was clear right away that it wasn’t the right place for me. There was a lot of service going on without that
piece of Vincentian reflection. And so, as someone who’s very passionate about the charism and finds a lot of life in the charism and in this family, I think it would be really valuable to either start some sort of community for young adults, so that we can grow into it and keep this charism alive or to look at the structures we already have like the St. Vincent DePaul Society and really just analyze and assess what are we doing, who are we, how are we living out this Vincentian charism. – Chicago A

[I would like] a way to commit yourself organizationally to the charism and in a way that is not necessarily being done now. Sometimes when you are in those bored moments, when you’re googling all sorts of things, and you’re looking at the St. Vincent DePaul Society. There was one at my parish but there isn’t one anymore. Even then, there wasn’t anything like what I have come to know what is here. That probably isn’t the right thing for me, and I had even looked into the Ladies of Charity. I’m not really sure that’s what I’m looking for either. – New York

While all of the participants agreed that they wanted more opportunities for community connection, prayer and service, a few cautioned that any such opportunities risked becoming exclusive. How to create a Vincentian community for volunteer alumni that is also welcoming to newcomers?

I think what I would be concerned about happening if there were to be some kind of Vincentian formation program … in Chicago – a problem could possibly be for the CCM crowd to come in and have the wagons too tightly circled. Because obviously we want to be welcoming of people from the neighborhood and from the community. So trying to figure how to make it so it’s not like these are our CCM and DePaul grads and this is everybody else. Loosening that up would be a concern of mine. – Chicago A

You’re right, you have one community which connects you to another community. And so, if you find yourself outside of those communities, ... that could be difficult to find your community as an outsider. They have set themselves up, and they are there and they do things together, and I am sure it is possible [to join them], but I can imagine [it would be difficult]. – Chicago B
Searching for a Spiritual Home

A second goal of the focus group research was to explore the religiosity of the former volunteers, their current connection to the Catholic Church, and their interest, if any, in Church service. Participants described their difficulties in finding a “spiritual home” after experiencing the community prayer and service of their volunteer year. For some, this had resulted in their drifting away from the Church, or substituting a Vincentian identity for a Catholic one. Others felt that they had become more, rather than less, religiously connected. All agreed that most of the others in their generation were more likely to consider themselves “spiritual” rather than “religious,” at least partly because religion in general had a negative connotation among their age peers.

The participants unanimously agreed that their experiences of prayer and community during their volunteer time period had been so spiritually transformative that it was difficult to find a similar experience in other Church settings. Almost all described a period of “parish shopping” which, for some, had not yet ended:

Finding a church is really difficult because another thing CVV does is it heightens your expectations. It heightens your expectations of what spirituality and relationship should look like. And so you go into some of these, which I think all of us do, traditional Catholic churches and sometimes those experiences can feel very inauthentic. And when you feel that, I push away from that. – Denver

It’s difficult. I consider myself to be quite a Church-hopper in the last four years. The parish that I went to before I came to St. John’s doesn’t really feel like home anymore. ... I look around. I have been active and looking to find a place where I want to go to Mass, but there hasn’t been a place where I really feel called to join in a real parish way where I am participating in the Mass itself, getting involved in service projects. It is difficult, and I am still looking. — New York

I feel like forever I’ve never gotten a ton of feeling or meaning from Sunday night Mass, like regular Mass or reconciliation. It’s always been like, “Oh, that’s nice.” I like the people, the feeling of that, when we talk about how we’re feeling or what’s going on in our lives like in a structural way or a social way. It’s just like prayer with myself or things like that...it’s never really gotten a ton of meaning or fulfillment out of. So I feel like I’ve kind of struggled between times when I’ve felt invested in going to church or other activities in the parish. But I feel like it’s more because of the people. I feel invested in them and what we do together, not so much my personal fulfillment. – Chicago A
Several participants had continued to attend Mass at their former university. For some, this arrangement was satisfactory; for others, there was still something lacking.

**Participant:** I forced myself to church-shop for a parish that was closer to my apartment or trying to start a life and not stay remaining in college. After an entire summer of trying different churches, I ended up figuring out that my spiritual home was at St. Vincent’s parish. That had a lot to do with the fact that it was Vincentian .... It has been the best choice. I have been an active parishioner for four or five years. It is my spiritual home.

**Participant:** Still home, it’s just a different sense of home.

**Facilitator:** In what way?

**Participant:** When I think about the student Mass, I attach it to the community that we built within Catholic Campus Ministry and the specific events that would go along with that. I was at a point where I was finding my faith a lot, we are all still finding our faith. But we have a different understanding now.

**Participant:** And it’s unique because when you’re a college student, especially in that community, you’re all mostly within the same age range, going through the same things, and so it’s a very specific context since everybody’s one the same page. When you graduate, everyone starts looking very, very different. – Chicago B

You can still go to the [student] Mass. There’s that feeling, “I graduated. Should I be here?” So, it’s that awkward feeling. Am I just holding onto something that I did in college that I need to let go of? And then, to go to the [other] Mass, it’s all neighborhood people. I don’t know anyone. It’s all people with children and babies and older people. So you don’t really fit into the college community but you also don’t fit into the neighborhood community either. Finding that in between space has been hard for me. – Chicago A

It was very important to the participants that they feel a sense of community in any parish they attended. Many expressed a sense of social anxiety about entering a situation where they didn’t know anyone; others noted that being the only representative of their age cohort in a parish felt lonely and disconcerting:

**Participant:** I’m not connected with a church of my choice in Denver, but I go to church with my grandparents at times. It’s their church and it’s not exactly what I would choose, but it’s the only time I get to spend time with them. And I enjoy spending time in that community, which is so important to them. It sounds kind of silly, maybe, not to engage in what I want, what I would choose. But for me, going to church by myself seems less fun than going to church with my grandparents and engaging in that relationship with them.
Facilitator: Is that a problem, going to a church by yourself?  
Participant: Yes.  
Participant: It sucks (Laughter).  
Facilitator: What could a church do to keep it from being so bad? I mean, in the sense of—yeah, you’re right, it’s hard to go by yourself.  
Participant: Well once you meet people, make connections. Like, now the church where I go there are friends there and yeah it’s, it’s not a problem at all. But if you’re going to a new church, where you’re just going by yourself, that’s when it’s not happening. – Denver  

There’s definitely some aspect of social anxiety, especially for us poor millennials, [Laughter] that makes it hard. It’s like, “Okay. I’m going to go to this every third Sunday, but I don’t know if anyone else I know is going to be there. I might just be standing around, sitting at this table.” Or “I’m going to just go to the [non-student] Mass and not knowing what’s going on. The music is going to be different. The priest is going to be different.” So I feel like this current crop of recently graduated students is sort of an anxious bunch, in regard to the social aspects of putting yourself out there in a new situation. – Chicago A  

That’s definitely a struggle of not feeling really connected to the parish. There isn’t a group of young parishioners. I would say that in my age bracket there are maybe 15 people who go to my Church. That’s sad and very underwhelming. New York  

An additional theme which surfaced in one of the Chicago groups was the participants’ unease with the theological stance of those few Catholics their age who were involved in parishes:  

Participant: [A] lot of young Catholics that are very involved in their parish or just in church in general are kind of like, “We are going to stand up to what society is saying we should change and we’re going to hold true to what the Catechism has said for the last 2,000 years. And by God, it doesn’t matter if we lose everyone in the Church. We’re going to heaven and that’s all that’s important.” [Laughter] It’s this thing where like, “Gosh. That’s really intense and not accepting at all in any way.” I don’t feel that way at St. Vincent’s. But at some churches, when I meet other young people that are involved, we don’t have anything in common.  
Participant: It’s more conservative than I’m looking for.  
Participant: Yeah.  
Facilitator: Several of you resonated on that one. [Laughter] ...  
Participant: I would like to feel more connected to the actual structure and
institution, but every time I try that I find things that don’t resonate with me at all, and I don’t know what that means, saying between myself and the institution.

Participant: Right.

Participant: Right. Because when you go to a Theology on Tap, you’re like, “Wow! These people are super conservative!” And you’re like, “Well. I don’t quite fit here.” So it’s about finding a place. Where exactly do I fit? And it’s not like people can’t come together and have a dialogue about differing opinions. But that’s not always what you want to go to. If you want to go to something that’s comfortable, that wouldn’t be my go-to event for people. – Chicago A

Facilitator: What other groups like that are there that make you feel uncomfortable?

Participant: What’s the one that’s called like…?

Participant: I went to a [Parish] social group once a long time ago and it felt like that.

Participant: I can’t handle [Parish]

Participant: I tagged along to [Parish].

Participant: Oh, gosh! In that church, you kneel at the altar rail. [Laughter] – Chicago A

While the participants in the other three focus groups did not specifically say that they were put off by their conservative Catholic peers, they did mention that what they appreciated about the Vincentian Volunteer programs was that they were open and inclusive of varying types of persons and opinions.

The Vincentian piece, like everyone has been saying, provides that different outlook or way of living. Religion can very much, like [another participant] started saying, seem like doctrine, which in society’s view closes you off from thinking on a more personal or individualized level. Religion provides that community, but only if you share that same belief with everybody else in that community. The Vincentian piece allows that inclusion and a different way of life.
– Chicago B

When we talk about prayer, it has to be something that people can feel connected with in a way regardless of their affiliation or if they have no religious affiliation. ... one of the reasons that service is so popular on our campus is that we find a way to invite people in through this service and then we do the reflection and the prayer in a way that everyone there can connect with somehow. It’s not just, “Okay, all you Catholics come around and we are going to pray in a Catholic way that will make others feel uncomfortable. And then you’re going to feel Vincentian.” It’s not like that. – New York
In talking about inserting yourself into a parish community or a church community, well, you can find different communities. But most churches teach in black and white terms, and that is important because that’s our foundation and that’s what we’re coming from, that’s our tradition. Often it’s a challenge to take a grey perspective into a black and white conversation, and be heard, or feel nourished. Even if it’s just raising a question in an environment where you know the answer but you want to entertain the question. – Denver

Previous studies of Millennials have found that tolerance for differing opinions and lifestyles is very important to them. The perceived intolerance of traditionalist Catholics would thus be off-putting. A challenge of this desire for tolerance and inclusion, of course, would be to avoid becoming so inclusive that the Catholic identity of the program was lost.

You know, I think the values of the Vincentian family are pretty universal to a lot of families around the world, not just Vincentians, and not just Catholics or Christians. People who practice their religion on other side of the world, like Buddhists or other traditions, as an example. So just to have ways to connect and form community that are not necessarily tied to the formal Catholic or Vincentian tradition. – Denver

Maintaining (or Losing) an Ongoing Relationship with the Catholic Church

Overall, the participants had remained more closely tied to the Catholic Church than most of their age peers, persisting in their search for a spiritual home in spite of disappointments and obstacles.

Participant: Yeah, I’m very close to the church that I currently go to. And that’s very important to me and I don’t have any intention of not being connected to a church congregation.

Participant: Same.

Participant: I’m kind of fearful, in looking at the future, in looking at getting married and having a family. Because when I grew up we had a really connected parish. You want this family formation, and we had a lot of that and it was awesome. And now I look at churches and I don’t see them being so active, in activities for the families, and catechesis, and youth programs, and social activities. ... It doesn’t mean I’m not going to go to church or anything like that, but I’d like to see that in the future for our parishes. – Denver

I have a home parish in which I am very involved in. ... We see that as one of our responsibilities, looking around and seeing very few people in our age brackets
saying, “This is going to be us.” When you look at the parish council, which we are not on. In ten or fifteen years, that’s going to be us. We are going to be the ones who are still around. I feel very fortunate that I have this – it is also the parish that I grew up with. I am very fortunate that I have this connection. – New York

A few participants, however, stated that they no longer consider themselves Catholic at all.

I identify as Christian, but not with any specific denomination right now. I always get frustrated with older generations are like, “Oh those Millennials can’t commit to anything and say that they are spiritual but not religious.” Granted it’s all my friends, I feel like it’s a very valid place to be. There’s something more going on besides just the mess of humanity, but I am not going to subscribe to any one definition, or any one doctrine, or any one church body that is going to make me commit to going to church or the temple every week. — Chicago B

For some, this distancing from religion was because of the pull of other activities, and because they were now associating with a different, and less religiously-oriented, group of people. For others, the very idea of “religion” had come to have negative connotations in their age group, such that they were reluctant to associate themselves with it.

I have part time job and a graduate assistantship, and between all of that I don’t have a lot of extra time, and I find myself naturally moving into new communities with people that I am working with every day. A lot of that strong sense of Vincentian connection goes away a little bit. – Chicago B

Participant: I majored in Catholic Studies here at DePaul and was very involved here in Catholic Campus Ministry. I spent a lot of time at church and on retreats. Also part of it is that now where I am at, a lot of people I am around have been really negatively impacted by the Church.
Facilitator: And where are you?
Participant: Women’s and Gender Studies.
Facilitator: Oh my, yeah, okay.
Participant: Yeah [laughter]. So there’s a lot of people who are sort of trying to figure out what their relationship is to it. I wouldn’t say that I’ve lost it, but I am in that space where I don’t know what I think about it all. – Chicago B

During my CVV year I had a family friend that came out [to visit]. She’s my sister’s friend. I was talking to my sister afterward and she said that her friend said I was very religious. And I got really angry about that and said “I’m not religious!” and I had to think about that. I mean, why did I get so angry? She
saw me at bar, so how would she know I’m religious? And then I really reflected on what that meant and why that was bothering me. And I guess that today, for me religion has such a bad name. And I think that’s what I attached to it. I’d rather think of myself as spiritual and having a connection to God. – Denver

I have worked at a Catholic school for the last four years. I teach religion to 9th and 10th graders. What I have learned from that, most of my students who say that they are spiritual but not religious, it stems from two places that I have seen. The first is possibly a mistrust in whatever religion that they were raised in. If they didn’t have a great experience with whoever was forming them, whoever it may be, that could be a huge part of it. The second part of it is the lack of importance coming from their families. Their religion – God - isn’t number one, God is maybe number ten or eleven or twelve. – New York

A few said that they identified as Vincentians rather than identifying as Catholic:

Participant: I do think that Vincentianism is not so much about holding a tagline as it is about being part of a community and what Christ calls you to do within the community. I think that’s helpful, it feels less exclusionary when you don’t know what you think about this right now, which is good. ...

Participant: I’m in this weird space where I am Christian and Vincentian but don’t subscribe to anything more particular than that.

Participant: I think the point that I was poorly making was that Vincentianism has allowed me to realize that there is so much more to Christianity and religion than going to Church, saying the rosary, and doing confession. You can embody this lifestyle and that can be your definition. – Chicago B

Vocations to Church Service

The Catholic Volunteer Network and the DePaul surveys both found that men and women who had engaged in a Catholic volunteer experience for a year were several times more likely to say that they had considered a vocation to the priesthood or religious life than other single lay Catholics their age. The CVN survey, in which the respondents were somewhat older, found that some 5 percent of the male respondents were already priests, seminarians, or religious brothers. In the focus groups, only one participant was actively discerning a call to religious life. But several had considered a vocation in the past, and many knew of other volunteers who had done so.
Participant: During my CVV year, like, there were three women, including myself who were discerning religious life and at least one guy who was discerning religious life.

Participant: During my year there was one girl, but she didn’t really share that with anyone until afterwards I found out. I think she like, continued to immerse herself [in discernment]. – Denver

Facilitator: Have you or has someone that you know well from your volunteer experiences ever thought of entering the priesthood or the religious life? Do you know of anyone who after they were a volunteer decided to do so?

Participant: [Multiple participants whisper the same name].

Facilitator: [Name]?

Participant: Yeah. [Laughter].

Participant: One of our friends who went here and is a recent grad did his bachelor’s and master’s here is just signed away to enter the Vincentians, so that’s exciting. That just happened recently, so that’s the first person that comes to mind. – New York

For the most part, however, the participants did not finally decide to become priests or sisters:

Well I have a funny story for you. [Laughter] I was very seriously discerning becoming a Daughter of Charity like [Name]. I was actually on an online discernment retreat like you Skype every week with the Daughter and chat. It was the last day of the discernment retreat and it was somebody’s Feast Day. I don’t know whose Feast Day it was. And I turned on Skype and said, “Sister [Name]! Happy Feast Day!” And she said, “Honey, there’s no hope for you. You’re going to be a Daughter.” And I said, “Unless some sign comes along today, I really think I am.” My now-husband called and asked me out on a date that day. If it hadn’t been for that providential moment and for meeting the absolute right person, I would have been a Daughter. – Chicago A

The participants agreed that the volunteer experience of living and praying together, and the close contact with sisters and priests, was conducive at least to thinking about vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

I considered religious life from the time I was in high school to a little over a year ago, on and off again. CVV for me was, it was very private for me. It was hard for me to talk about, even with people who were part of my community or really close friends. But, CVV did give me an opportunity to do a lot of intention around that, to do some reading. And my spiritual director that year was a sister, so, I had the opportunity to talk to her about that and to really do some intentional
journaling. So, CVV was really supportive in that way, even though it didn’t know it was being supportive, by just providing like a safe place to kind of think about it. – Denver

Especially through the personal relationships with Vincentians and Daughters. We have a number of Vincentians here and we have a Daughter who this year has joined our staff in Campus Ministry, she’s phenomenal. One thing I always reflect on about her is that she is a joyful person and energetic person. She’s one of those just beautiful examples that people can look to her and say, “I want this for my life. I want to be as happy as she is. I can still be a teacher and work, have this kind of job, she’s a campus minister, so I could do that.” Those personal witnesses make religious life just so much more accessible and not this kind of separate thing. – New York

Even my husband one time when we came back to Chicago to visit said, “Wow. The Vincentians are doing it right. Do you know how many of your friends were talking about maybe being Daughters of Charity?”… But I think there’s something very special about the way Vincentians are forming young people that makes them see religious vocation as an opportunity and as a desirable lifestyle versus sacrificing your life for the Church. We’re doing something right, and I think we just need to tap into it a little bit more. – Chicago A

Even though few of the participants had decided to enter religious life, several had entered Church service as lay ministers, either at a parish or with the campus ministry program at the university they had formerly attended:

I’ve been blessed to work in a church now, we have Mass every day. I come to work every day in an office with 20 people. I’m blessed. Not many people get to do that. So it’s definitely been a gift in my life. … I’m just thankful God put me in a place where I can let that grow in my life, and I’m not ashamed to say that. I like my religion. I enjoy being Catholic and it’s a great gift in my life. – Denver

Although I didn’t necessarily say that I had the intention of becoming a campus minister or work at St. John’s, because I had known the charism so well, it made me feel like I was home in a real way. Making that transition, it’s been a wonderful transition, of being someone receiving the mission to someone who is an agent of that mission, a co-worker with the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity and the other lay Vincentians here. – New York

I get to pray a lot, which is really cool about what I do at St. Vincent’s. I think I was telling [Name] at lunch. I get paid to pray, [Laughter] to go to Mass and reflect, which is a blessing … And for me, I’m kind of missing that social aspect.
I’m working on it, especially with the young adult stuff I’m co-running. I’m getting it, but it’s almost more of a job and less of a social thing or finding that family. Fortunately, y’all are really great. So when I see you, it’s not a job. – Chicago A

Participant: Yeah, I’m very close to the church that I currently go to. And that’s very important to me and I don’t have any intention of not being connected to a church congregation.

Participant: Same. – Denver

At least one person – usually more than one – in each focus group was currently employed in a parish or university campus ministry. Several others, especially in the Denver focus group, were actively involved as parishioners in their parishes. As one participant noted, very few young adult Catholics are in these kinds of lay leadership positions. Their own involvement in such activities is counter-cultural in comparison with others of their peers.
Appendix I: Focus Group Protocol
Unaffiliated Lay Vincentians

Introduction
A focus group is a gathering of about 8-12 people for about an hour to 90 minutes to talk about a particular topic in some detail. A protocol, not a questionnaire, is used. The protocol sets out the major issues that the focus group is convened to address, including a variety of probes that the researcher may use as necessary.

Unlike a questionnaire, a protocol is not followed rigorously. While survey research requires consistency every time an instrument is used, a focus group demands flexibility. Thus, not all the probes or other specific questions on a protocol are necessarily asked in a specific focus group experience. Rather, the protocol serves as a starting point for each focus group, and the experience of each focus group varies considerably depending on the issues and experiences surfaced in a particular group.

Advantages and Limitations
**Focus groups allow for:**
- An intensive understanding of a particular issue.
- A discovery of perspectives and ways of thinking not previously considered or known.

**Focus groups do not:**
- Provide measures of frequency of certain attitudes, practices, or behaviors.
- Measure a particular set of characteristics in a population.

Scientifically selected random sample surveys are best to fulfill those functions.

Timeline and Sites Selected for this Study
CARA will conduct four focus groups for this study. The Office of Mission and Values at DePaul University will make all arrangements for gathering participants for these focus groups. The focus groups will be composed of “unaffiliated lay Vincentians,” young adults between the ages of 18-35 who have had a formative experience in the Vincentian mission in some capacity, either as a student or as a post-graduate volunteer at a Vincentian institution. The focus groups will be facilitated by CARA researcher Patricia Wittberg, SC. They will be designed to last between 60 and 90 minutes.

Purpose:
The focus groups will help CARA learn from these “unaffiliated lay Vincentians” to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences with the Vincentian mission, their commitment to that mission, and their openness to and/or desire for formation in the Vincentian charism.

Procedure:
The focus group proceedings will be audio-taped and analyzed by CARA to explore further some of the survey findings and open-ended comments of volunteer alumni who responded to a 2014 CARA study, “Unaffiliated Lay Vincentians’ Informal Engagement with the Vincentian Mission.” Selected comments from the focus groups may be incorporated into the final report for this project, but no individual participant will be identified and any information in the discussion that could reveal the identity of an individual participant will not be included in any report of the findings.
Unaffiliated Lay Vincentians

Focus Group Protocol

**Introductions and Brief Description of the Project**

Hello! My name is _______________. I am a researcher collaborating with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). CARA is a social scientific research center affiliated with Georgetown University that uses surveys and other social science methods to study Catholic populations and institutions. Last year, DePaul University’s Office of Mission and Values commissioned CARA to survey young adults who had participated in a Vincentian volunteer program. This focus group is part of a follow-up to that survey. We are hoping to gain a deeper understanding of former volunteers’ past and current experiences.

You have been invited to this focus group today to discuss aspects of your Vincentian volunteer experience. In particular, we are interested in hearing your experiences while you were a volunteer and the effect that volunteer service has had on your life. We would like to hear about changes in yourself you have noticed as a result of your volunteer service as well as any interest you might have in further contact with the Vincentian mission.

As you may know, a focus group is simply a guided discussion or conversation. It is a way to understand how people think or feel about a particular topic or issue and to get some feedback from them. This is not a test. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers to the questions we will be asking. I also want to be clear that I am not here to promote any particular policy or agenda. I am here for your honest feedback. I will tape the focus group, but only so that I can accurately capture your feedback. No names or other identifying information will be included in the final report of findings.

I anticipate this focus group will last between 60 and 90 minutes. We will cover a number of topics, all related to your experiences as an unaffiliated lay Vincentian. While I encourage your participation in this group, your participation is not required. At times, we may be talking about sensitive information; I ask that you be respectful and honest, and that whatever is said in this room remain in this room.

Any questions? Any concerns? Before I turn on the tape recorder, let’s go around the room briefly and tell me your name, your year in school, and the type of Vincentian volunteer experience you have had.

*First, let’s talk about your volunteer experience and how it has affected your life. We understand that for some of you this may have been service in a formal volunteer program, such as Vincentian volunteers, while for others this would have been a less formal undergraduate service opportunity.*

**The Volunteer Experience**

Thinking back on your volunteer experience, can you describe any ways that the experience changed you?

- What effect did your volunteer experience have on your life choices?
- How did your volunteer experience affect your relationships with others?
- What effect did your volunteer experience have on your prayer life?
We’d like to hear more about what you’ve done (or plan to do) since your volunteer experience.

**Interest in Other Vincentian Activities** 15 minutes

Since the time you completed your volunteer experience, what other Vincentian activities have you been involved in? If you are still engaged in your volunteer service (or still a student engaging in service) what other Vincentian activities appeal to you?

- What is it about these Vincentian activities that you find most engaging?
- Is it the ongoing connections with the poor and marginalized that appeals to you, is it the formation/deepening of your faith life, is it some aspect of living/working in community, is it the shared prayer, is it the professional opportunities in the Vincentian family…?
- What is your personal motivation to be involved in these Vincentian activities?

We recognize that there are many challenges in life that make it difficult to commit to service as a lay volunteer. Let’s explore some of these obstacles.

**Challenges to Volunteer Service/Commitment** 15 minutes

What are some of the challenges and obstacles you face as a lay person with a desire to grow in the Vincentian mission?

- What are the realities in your life that are obstacles to your ongoing formation in the Vincentian mission?
- What demands on your time and attention distract you from deeper involvement?
- Are there some ways in which the Vincentian family does not meet your needs?
- If you could forget the obstacles you currently face, what would a long-term commitment to the Vincentian mission look like for a lay person?

A common expression people sometimes use is to say they are “spiritual but not religious.” Some people say that they are “spiritual AND religious.” Let’s explore these concepts.

**Religiosity of Unaffiliated Lay Volunteers** 20 minutes

What is the difference, to you, between “spiritual” and “religious”? Can one be both at the same time?

- How do you describe yourself in these terms? Do you think of yourself as religious, or spiritual, or both?
- Did your experience as a Vincentian volunteer influence your understanding of being spiritual and/or religious?
- What are your hopes and expectations for your relationship to the Vincentian mission? To the other Vincentian volunteers with whom you served? With a parish? With the Catholic Church?

IF THERE IS TIME: Have you, or someone you know well from your volunteer service, ever thought about entering the priesthood or religious life? How has your volunteer experience influenced your thinking about a vocation to religious life or priesthood?
Appendix II: Complete Transcripts of Focus Groups
Unaffiliated Lay Vincentians

Focus Group One – Chicago

Facilitator: Thinking back on your volunteer experience, can you describe any ways that the experience changed you?

Participant: I came into DePaul thinking I was going to be a journalism major and I took one journalism class and I hated it. [Laughter] And so I was like, “Aw, shoot, now what am I going to do?” So, I switched my major to communications studies with a focus on interpersonal relationships. I was like okay. [Laughter] I didn’t really know what that meant. So through my involvement with Catholic campus ministry, I came to get involved in going to Vincent and Louise House dinners, and then eventually applied and lived there. I feel like that really shaped what my path has been since then.

Facilitator: In any particular ways?

Participant: It really helped me to understand the Vincentian mission of service and justice and kind of took me from a place where I felt like with my communication degree I was highly qualified to be a secretary or a housewife, and then I felt like after that I could see a path of social service work that could lead me down. So that was what led me to do the second volunteer experience that I did at Mercy Home and that is what then led me to pursue a career in social services.

Facilitator: Ah, so it affected your career choices. Anyone else that affected your career choices or your life choices in general?

Participant: I think for myself service that had kind of been a very direct service like soup kitchens or tutoring or things like that didn’t lend itself much to questions of why is something happening or there’s more impactful changes that could happen. And so I know I had done some service trips and volunteer groups for a while, but then I knew some people in the Vincent and Louise House and that really got me to hang out with them a lot more and see what they do. And through that and learning more about the Vincentian identity of what must be done and that whole question, it pushed me to do then my own second year of service and from that I feel like I’ve still been dabbling. I volunteer with Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, so we do lobbying around different advocacy issues with homelessness and housing and security in the city. And that’s also a part of my own job now as a caseworker around housing issues. So I feel like it’s a good medium of direct service work for people who are in those dire straits and needing help but then also asking bigger questions of why is a person homeless in the first place and what can we do to help those people who are on the verge of this not have to come see us in the first place because a lot of times when people come to us its already too far gone to help that much.

Facilitator: [Name] is nodding down there, so I assume she’s obviously agreeing with you.

Participant: Yes. My story is actually quite similar to [Name]. I came to DePaul because it has a…

Facilitator: Oh, good. Here’s the last person. Welcome. My name is [Name] and I’m a Sister of Charity. We’re sort of related to the Daughters and I lived with the Daughters for 15 years.

Participant: Cool.

Facilitator: And you are?
**Participant:** I’m [Name]. I graduated in [Year] from here and was in the V&L House and involved in all kinds of stuff.

**Facilitator:** Okay. Basically, we’re talking about how…The first thing we’re talking about is how your volunteer experience...Did it change you in any way? We interrupted [Name] in the middle of saying that you came here…

**Participant:** I came to DePaul under the impression that I was going to be a teacher. And DePaul has a really stellar education program. I didn’t pick the university because it was Catholic or because it was Vincentian. Just through being involved in CCM and starting to go to dinners at the Vincent and Louise House, I realized education is not the path I’m supposed to take, and I changed my major to Catholic Studies and pursued theology with a focus on Catholic social teaching and social justice. And I held ministry and faith and justice positions after college. So it very drastically changed my life in terms of a career path, but also what [Name] was saying about the Vincentian charism just nudges you to ask those big systemic questions like “what is the cause of the oppression and injustice in the world and how can we get to that root cause?” Yeah.

**Participant:** So I kind of go about this a little bit differently because I’m the only one in this room who has not been in Vincent and Louise House, even though I desperately wanted to. I didn’t pick DePaul again because it was Catholic school. I picked DePaul actually because I met a Vincentian priest, and I had been wandering around looking at the music school. I have my master’s in Music, and DePaul has a phenomenal music program. And I was really hard pressed to find a priest on campus and then I found one walking out of the chapel as it was being built and I attacked him. He likes to tell this story. Just asking all these Catholic questions and then being like a very traditional…Not that there’s anything wrong with this because I’m definitely coming back to those roots. But, you know, very focused on adoration, confession…You know, very traditionally based. I had gone to a Dominican school so I was aware of charisms. At that time I was discerning because you know I’m like the world’s longest discerner ever. And so I had been aware of different religious orders that were out there but I had never heard of the Vincentians or the Daughters of Charity. I was aware of the St. Vincent DePaul Society. And then when I got involved in Catholic campus ministry and I met the Vincentians and my junior year when I met my first Daughter of Charity, the world exploded for me. Like they are do good things for people and the job of taking care of each other. And now how I use this in my own life. I didn’t change everything about myself. Something I’m still really struggling with today is that my service is not systemic change. You know, it’s not finding people homes, feeding the hungry. It’s organizing ministries to help the poor in spirit. And coming to that realization with my vocation director who’s a Daughter or Charity…you know, talking about how that is still living the mission of St. Vincent DePaul and coming to terms with that has kind of been my Vincentian journey.

**Facilitator:** I want to make sure everyone has a chance to talk, but you don’t necessarily have to talk about your life choices in ministry. It can also be about your prayer life and your relationships with others. If you want to do those either…

**Participant:** Yeah. I came to DePaul and I didn’t know anything about the Vincent and Louise House. I chose DePaul because it was in Chicago, and I wanted to move to Chicago. And I really didn’t like Loyola. [Laughter] It was a little bit of a feeling I had, a little bit of intercampus rivalry. So I was like I’m going to go to DePaul. And I didn’t even really know what Campus ministry was. It was really the end of my senior year of high school that I even really realized I
was Catholic. But that’s a long story. So I stumbled into the Vincent and Louise House because there was chalk on the sidewalk. So that was how I was introduced to it. And then two years later that was where I was living. And I kind of just found myself living there. It was like a really cool thing to do and like that’s pretty much all I knew going into it. And there were like always cool people living there. They’re my friends. It’s like a big part of being in UMIN. Why wouldn’t I want to do this? And that’s like the starting to ask systemic questions and living with nine other people challenges almost every aspect of your life. I can’t think of one aspect that wasn’t challenged. So being challenged in that way was pretty unforgettable. So when it came to graduation, I figured I would probably want to do a service program or want to do some sort of career that is a lot like yours, helping people find homes and those very physical things that people need. But I didn’t. I didn’t feel like I wanted to. It’s just not where my heart was when I graduated. Though, eventually I don’t want to work in a bank anymore. I work in a bank, if no one knew that. [Laughter] So I just see myself like everywhere challenging. I’m also a very loud person, so I challenge strangers whenever they call someone on the street xy or z words or harass a homeless person on the train because they’re sleeping. And like, “Do you understand you had a place to sleep last night? Do you understand that?” And then they stare at me and I’m like, “Yes. I am actually challenging you.” Then I get off and get on my commute to work. I like to think that I bring some dignity to the banking world. [Laughter] Just a little bit, especially when my manager is ready to kick someone out because they’re negative four or five hundred dollars instead of helping them try to find a solutions. I’m just like, “No. We can do this. We’ll figure this out. I’m going to call the social worker, because they can’t communicate with me or you. And you’re just frustrated so that’s why you’re kicking them out, not because we don’t have a solution for them.” So it’s stuff like that…the daily grind. I feel like I wouldn’t have the backbone to or the facts and figures or experience behind me if I hadn’t seen what I saw in the Vincent and Louise House.

Facilitator: [Name of the late arrival], I don’t know if you’ve had a chance to acclimate yourself to this or not.

Participant: Yeah. I’ll give it a stab. When I came to DePaul, I was interested in computer science. I had visited and I kind of just fell in love with the campus and Chicago. I come from a Protestant background, so the Catholic thing I was kind of like “Oh, well this is interesting.” [Laughter] It wasn’t really on my radar. In my freshman year, I came in as a Student Leadership Scholar and it kind of got me implemented into UMIN and a little bit of everything that DePaul offers, and it kind of got the Vincentian conversation going for me. And kind of similar, I kind of stumbled into V&L, the Vincent and Louise House, for an open dinner. I was just very curious. I think my curiosity was ultimately a very good grace that led me to the V&L House. I was interested in Catholicism. You know, I would sneak off to Sunday night Mass. [Laughter] I just loved liturgy. I grew up in nondenominational and I just loved the liturgy. I was like, “This is beautiful.” So all of this kind of…My sophomore year I lived in the Vincent and Louise House. It connected a lot to like…I was passionate about service before and justice issues but I didn’t have like any guiding in it. I was passionate about faith, and the V&L House was a very open environment that kind of embraced me and kind of helped shape and guide me to go further in what I was curious in. And I think from the V&L House until now, I always say it wrecked me in a holy way [Laughter] because I kind of came in thinking I knew what I wanted to do. I was like, “I’m going to be a computer programmer. I’m going to do this.” And I came out, switched majors and I’m like, “I don’t know.” I came out not knowing what I was going to do, but I knew
something had happened. Kind of like a journey had formed from that. It’s kind of led me…fast forward to now. I lived last year in a hospitality house in Uptown. I’m still involved with them. It’s like my second year with them…kind of like an internship kinda thing. I’m finishing up grad school for Theology and what’s ironic is that I also work as a computer programmer now [Laughter] so it’s like I started off at DePaul doing that. But I think it’s kind of…it’s set me in this really interesting journey and I think it has given me, DePaul in general, a good foundation to go forward with service and justice and the spirit of St. Vincent.

**Facilitator:** I don’t want you all to feel like you have to say something each time, but I want to give everyone a chance to say something once. But, you know, building off both what [Name] said and what [Name] said, do you want to say more about how this affected your prayer life, building off what [Name] was saying or your relationships with other people, building off what [Name] was saying and people that challenge you? But, you don’t have to say something. I just mean I thought I’d give you a chance to say that if you wanted to.

**Participant:** I plan liturgy for the 5pm Sunday night Mass. I do lots of that fun stuff. I pick the music, and I write reflections for the choir, you know. And I am having a hard time remembering a time when I wrote a reflection that didn’t involve like “and that means our challenge is…” or “our call as Christ’s body, as Christ’s hands and voice.” I can’t remember a time when. I know that that existed obviously back before Vincent and Louis and Vincentian, you know in my life, before that changed me. But, in my own prayer, and coming to terms with realizing that we’re all parts of a body, the body of Christ. You know, we all have different functions and do different things and taking comfort in that as well.

**Facilitator:** Are any of you still involved in, other than [Name] who’s at a Vincent DePaul parish, still involved in Vincentian activities? Would you like to be? Is there anything appealing to you to be engaged in Vincentian activities now?

**Participant:** I go to St. Vincent’s every once in a while, not terribly regularly.

**Facilitator:** St. Vincent’s meaning…?

**Participant:** St. Vincent’s Parish.

**Facilitator:** The parish. Okay.

**Participant:** My roommate goes very often and he’s very involved in the young adult groups, so I end up with him some events they’re having every once in a while. Yeah. I feel like there’s parts of it I really like. It’s also interesting though because I feel like some people who are coming to it having not been around much Vincentian life are just very, very different in how they understand it or what they’re getting out of it.

**Facilitator:** In any particular ways?

**Participant:** I feel like it’s the fact that they’re coming to it as…Most of the people are older than me anyways. But, coming to in that they have already kind of gotten some grappling of their feeling about religion and about how that relates to the rest of their life. And now they’re coming
to St. Vincent’s just because it’s kind of in their neighborhood, or it’s convenient or they heard it’s a good place or something like that. But they didn’t come up in the Vincentian ideals. So it’s just a weird difference. It’s not that it’s good or bad. I feel like there’s more of that crowd than those of us who have been around for a while and have really come up in that community.

Participant: I’d say that’s a fair assessment.

Participant: Yeah. It’s not that it’s a bad thing, but I feel odd there at times.

Facilitator: Anybody else? Anything you’re involved in that’s Vincentian now that you’ve graduated?

Participant: Something I appreciate about Vincentian missionaries is that they have two retreats every year that alumni. Alumni? Previous volunteers. [Laughter]

Facilitator: They’re often called alumni. That’s an okay word.

Participant: Are invited to participate in. And so I know that I’m always welcome to attend one of those retreats. And, you know, kind of re-center myself in the charism. I have been pestering the Daughters for the longest time to form a lay affiliate group. I know a lot of different…

Participant: Like a third order?

Participant: Yeah. A lot of different groups of sisters have lay groups that are just connected to them, where you can go and eat dinner and pray and serve and all that wonderful stuff. But the Daughters keep telling me, “Oh, there’s the St. Vincent DePaul Society. You need to go join that.” I tried to join it.

Facilitator: And?

Participant: When I moved away from school. And it scared them how much I knew about St. Vincent. [Laughter] And I was a little too Vincentian for the St. Vincent DePaul Society. [Laughter]

Facilitator: Is this in your parish, this St. Vincent DePaul Society?

Participant: The Society is worldwide.

Facilitator: Yeah. I know that. I was in it in my parish in [state].

Participant: Oh, okay.

Facilitator: So I do know that. But, I meant there’s also a citywide level. I was wondering if you were involved on the parish level or a larger level.
Participant: When I first moved out to [Place], I went to one of the citywide meetings because I was still parish shopping and trying to find my parish home. And it was clear right away that it wasn’t the right place for me. There was a lot of service going on without that piece of Vincentian reflection. And so, as someone who’s very passionate about the charism and finds a lot of life in the charism and in this family, I think it would be really valuable to either start some sort of community for young adults, so that we can grow into it and keep this charism alive or to look at the structures we already have like the St. Vincent DePaul Society and really just analyze and assess what are we doing, who are we, how are we living out this Vincentian charism.

Facilitator: I see [Name] nodding. But I don’t know how [Name] or [Name] or [Name] feel about it. Any particular thing you’d like to have happen to keep you connected to the charism now that you’ve graduated?

Participant: I think I’m still very involved in that hospitality house, but one thing, the reflection, is the biggest thing I miss the most and that kind of communal reflection and the understanding that it brings to the table. Like what [Name] said too. I feel like a lot of times I can feel a little isolated or people are just doing it because they live in the area. There’s not as much attachment and depth I guess and I do miss that reflection I experienced here, the Vincentian reflection. Yeah.

Facilitator: If you could...and [Name] sort of answered this herself already. But, if you could, if you had the power to make the ideal thing or program or something to connect people to the Vincentian charism, as post-college adult lay people, what would it be like?

Participant: I definitely see the value in having some kind of lay Vincentian program to connect Vincentian young adults to. In a way, I feel like definitely—kind of like what [Name] was saying—the people who come to the parish from the neighborhood are really different from the people formed at the university and kind of sent out, doing volunteer programs all across the United States and also people who stay local in Chicago and do some other local thing. And so, to connect all those people under one umbrella, to have a social aspect, a prayer aspect, a service aspect to kind of keep in motion all of the formation that we’ve had as students at DePaul or as people who have done service programs, to kind of keep that moving after the college or post-grad service has ended.

Facilitator: Any others?

Participant: This is so interesting. I haven’t even thought about it. I wouldn’t even think of a network. I might be just still coming off my V and L high, but I don’t associate—like I have coworkers—but I don’t associate with people that don’t have the Vincentian background. [Laughter] I don’t have close friends that didn’t go to DePaul or didn’t live with me. My closest friends are the people who lived with me my junior year of college.

Participant: I think we have a very rich, tight-knit community of people who graduated from here and then have stayed here or have gone and then come back, on a social level.
Facilitator: [Inaudible]

Participant: For sure. And it’s definitely on a social level. I feel like we have a very rich social life in community with the people we were in community with but less rich on the spiritual and service side for sure.

Facilitator: Obviously, there are obstacles that you face as a lay person with a job. You can’t just take off from the bank in the middle of the day and say, “I’m going to serve the poor now.” [Laughter] So, what are the realities in your life that would keep you from ongoing formation in the Vincentian mission and work? You said you still had this relationship aspect. But the prayer for some people and the service for some people, what keeps you from that?

Participant: I think for me it’s the opposite. I get to pray a lot, which is really cool about what I do at St. Vincent’s. I think I was telling [Name] at lunch. I get paid to pray, [Laughter] to go to Mass and reflect, which is a blessing. Oh, I was telling you! Yes. And for me, I’m kind of missing that social aspect. I’m working on it, especially with the young adult stuff I’m co-running. I’m getting it, but it’s almost more of a job and less of a social thing or finding that family. Fortunately, ya’ll are really great. So when I see you, it’s not a job. But, there’s something that’s missing.

Participant: I also think that for the people in this room we came and grew up in a scenario, where we could go to the same parish every week. That was just what you did. You went to night Mass at 8:30. And then you graduated and it was like “Okay. Bye!” [Laughter] And then you can continue to go to St. Vincent’s, the parish. You can still go to the 8:30 Mass. There’s that feeling, “I graduated. Should I be here?” So, it’s that awkward feeling. Am I just holding onto something that I did in college that I need to let go of? And then, to go to the 5 o’clock Mass, it’s all neighborhood people. I don’t know anyone. It’s all people with children and babies and older people. So you don’t really fit into the college community but you also don’t fit into the neighborhood community either. Finding that in between space has been hard for me.

Facilitator: Are there demands on your time or attention? In other words, is this a problem that you have with your own demands on your time and attention? Is there something in the way the Vincentian family does not meet your needs? Or is it both?

Participant: I think the desire is still there to find that space and community. I just think that it’s just not like as a student going to Mass on Sunday nights. It wasn’t just going to pray with your friends but going to pray with your community and everyone you knew. You could go to the 5 o’clock Mass but it’s a little different. The unity that’s there…It wasn’t the right feeling for me. It’s just how I feel. I’m looking for that but it’s just not quite there.

Facilitator: How could something or somebody or some group make a structure like [Name] was saying? Who could do that? Is this something that the college should do or a parish should do? Is there something somebody can do?
Participant: I know that there’s a thing at the parish, where every third Sunday anyone who’s spent time in service meets for dinner and talks about their experience. And that’s something that they do every third Sunday. Father [Name] noticed a need and made that available. I don’t go to that because I haven’t done a year of service.

Participant: Is that well attended?

Participant: It would be like ten people, maybe a little more, maybe a little less each time.

Participant: And then even Mass with the archbishop. I don’t know what that was like for you. But just walking in and seeing that community was like the good old times. We always joked about how that was a reunion. So, having a space to pray together actually made me starting thinking about what we should do. Should we have a Mass service thing? I’m not sure. [Name] and I, in Catholic Campus Ministry, worked with the liturgy and that was something that always came up the entire time I worked with [Name]. How do we get the students to graduate but graduate into St. Vincent’s? Because that was a real disconnect for a lot of my peers that graduated, as it was for me. I was like, “Yeah. I could go to 5 o’clock.” [Laughter]

Participant: I try!

Participant: There’s definitely some aspect of social anxiety, especially for us poor millennials, [Laughter] that makes it hard. It’s like, “Okay. I’m going to go to this every third Sunday, but I don’t know if anyone else I know is going to be there. I might just be standing around sitting at this table. Or I’m going to just go to the 5 o’clock Mass and not knowing what’s going on. The music is going to be different. The priest is going to be different.” So I feel like this current crop of recently graduated students is sort of an anxious bunch, in regard to the social aspects of putting yourself out there in a new situation.

Participant: A lot of steps that [Name] and I have taken with choir specifically is I’ve come in and run some of their choir rehearsals and actually directed Mass. So at least the choir kids will recognize me and know how I work with them. But that’s just one aspect of how many different aspects are there. How many different needs are there?

Facilitator: Some people say that they are “spiritual but not religious.” Some people say that they are “spiritual AND religious.” I don’t know if you’ve ever heard those or what you think. But, if you had to define those, what would you say? Again, there’s no right or wrong answer.

Participant: What would Rolheiser say? [Laughter]

Participant: What would Father James Halstead say? [Laughter]

Facilitator: Rolheiser was your teacher?

Participant: No. We read a book. We had to read that for the Vincent and Louise House class.
**Participant:** I’m currently reading it.

**Participant:** I’m catching up.

**Facilitator:** Spiritual versus religious. What does it mean to you? Can you be both?

**Participant:** I took this class where the professor said he hated that question or like when people say that they are “spiritual but not religious” because everyone has a religion. There’s not like a dichotomy there. Even if you don’t have a traditional religion, the way that you live your life is your religion. So, that’s always how I’ve thought about that. So, since taking that class, I don’t really make those, spirituality and religion, different anymore.

**Participant:** Yeah. I’ve never really understood that question. I always think of “Mysterious Ways” by U2. I always default to U2. [Laughter] That’s the only way I can understand what spiritual and religious mean. I think that song describes it. It’s like you are spiritual and religious, whether you want to be or not.

**Facilitator:** And it’s not to be an issue then?

**Participant:** I used to be of this mindset of like, “That doesn’t make sense. What are you talking about?” But then I moved all the way across the country and got completely disconnected with this community that had built me so far up the mountaintop in faith. And then no parish felt like home. Eventually, I got employed at a parish. So, religion and faith became work, and I didn’t want anything to do with it outside of work. So my faith life moved away from what I’d call the “religious side” of that question from the Sunday Mass, from adoration, from the Taize prayer, from any sort of organized faith. And it really just became some sort of a spirituality that I told myself I was really living in my everyday life to justify the fact that I just really didn’t want to go to church anymore. And so moving back to Chicago and getting re-immersed in this community has been a really interesting experience like to look back and realize how I fell into that dichotomy that I didn’t used to understand. Now, I’m just trying to piece back together religion and spirituality hand in hand. Long story short, when I think about religion, I think about the organized structure, the church. When I think spiritually I think about the belief system by which you live your life.

**Facilitator:** Does that distinction makes sense to any of the rest of you or to people you know if it doesn’t make sense to you?

**Participant:** I understand that because I feel like forever I’ve never gotten a ton of feeling or meaning from Sunday night Mass, like regular Mass or reconciliation. It’s always been like, “Oh, that’s nice.” I like the people, the feeling of that, when we talk about how we’re feeling or what’s going on in our lives like in a structural way or a social way. It’s just like prayer with myself or things like that…it’s never really gotten a ton of meaning or fulfillment out of. So I feel like I’ve kind of struggled between times when I’ve felt invested in going to church or other activities in the parish. But I feel like it’s more because of the people. I feel invested in them and what we do together, not so much my personal fulfillment.
Participant: I feel like, for me personally, my spirituality is seen through the lens of my religious expression. But I think it would make sense to a lot of my friends who would connect with that “spiritual or religious” dichotomy. So, it’s hard for me to grapple with that. I get what people mean when they say that. But, for me, it is seen through the lens of my religious expression, my spirituality. But I think I can relate to that, and I think there are a lot of people I know who can relate to that.

Facilitator: It’s a very common thing for people to say, especially millennials—well, actually baby boomers on down to be honest with you. Is that difficulty of making that apply something that came out of your Vincentian volunteer experience here? That sort of merging them together? You said you had read Fr. Rolheiser. Is that where it comes from? You said a lot of your friends resonate with that distinction but you don’t.

Participant: I feel that one of the things that was great about V&L…I went on to minor in Catholic Studies. It was really that I wanted to study with a couple of the professors. I thought they were great. [Laughter] But, it really connected my passions. Before, I had never connected faith to justice and service. I was raised more nondenominational, more evangelical. It was harder more me to abstractly connect it. But, as soon as I came into DePaul, I got really excited about theology. And then I’m in the V& L House doing all these things. Faith connected to almost everything, and it became bigger. So I think that if I didn’t have that experience, I might be able to relate more to the “spiritual but not religious” thing because religion was for me boring. So I think that for me DePaul, the V& L House, and the Vincentian experience helped give me a bigger picture.

Facilitator: Being somewhat conscious of the time...What are your hopes and expectations for your relationship to the Vincentian mission from here on out or to the other Vincentian volunteers with whom you’ve served? In the future, what do you hope your relationship will be or will become or will continue to be with the Vincentian mission and with volunteer alumni?

Participant: Vincentians for Life! [Laughter]

Participant: I was just thinking there’s no going back. You can’t. You can’t go back to not seeing people the way that Vincentians see people. Sometimes you get tired and grumpy but that doesn’t mean…

Facilitator: Or you’re going to alienate anybody at the bank. [Laughter]

Participant: Right. I mean it’s wrecked in a holy way.

Facilitator: With your relationships with other people and other Vincentians, what do you hope in the future?

Participant: I would like to have something that would help me to do that in a more planned and organized way. I kind of feel that in my experience of being a Vincentian, it kind of undid a lot
of my early teaching of my religion, my experience of going to DePaul. I was still in the middle
of that when I was graduating, and I haven’t managed to tie the loose ends back up. So I feel like
I probably could have used some…I’m three, four years out now and I’m still trying to tie up
some loose ends. I can’t go home. I can’t go back to where I was, but I need to figure out where
I’m moving forward to. So that’s something that would be helpful.

Participant: Yeah. That intentionality

Facilitator: How about your relationship to the Catholic Church or to a parish? Any hopes for
that in the future?

Participant: I hope I have a bit of a stronger one. Right now, I just go to Mass because I like to
go to Mass, not because I’m looking for a particular parish, not only just because Catholics go to
Mass every week but because I like it.

Participant: I feel like I’m caught between this feeling that a lot of young Catholics that are
very involved in their parish or just in church in general are kind of like, “We are going to stand
up to what society is saying we should change and we’re going to hold true to what the
Catechism has said for the last 2,000 years. And by God, it doesn’t matter if we lose everyone in
the Church. We’re going to heaven and that’s all that’s important.” [Laughter] It’s this thing
where like, “Gosh. That’s really intense and not accepting at all in any way.” I don’t feel that
way at St. Vincent’s. But at some churches, when I meet other young people that are involved,
we don’t have anything in common.

Participant: It’s more conservative than I’m looking for.

Participant: Yeah.

Facilitator: Several of you resonated on that one. [Laughter]

Participant: Wow.

Participant: I would like to feel more connected to the actual structure and institution, but every
time I try that I find things that don’t resonate with me at all, and I don’t know what that means,
saying between myself and the institution.

Participant: Right.

Participant: Right. Because when you go to a Theology on Tap, you’re like, “Wow! These
people are super conservative!” And you’re like, “Well. I don’t quite fit here.” So it’s about
finding a place. Where exactly do I fit? And it’s not like people can’t come together and have a
dialogue about differing opinions. But that’s not always what you want to go to. If you want to
go to something that’s comfortable, that wouldn’t be my go-to event for people.
Participant: And, as someone who works in that, I’m stuck to a parish. I have a really great parish that I’m stuck to. But it’s strange to juggle and balance. I do some work with a couple other parishes just liturgically and meeting other young adults specifically and spending time in those communities and feeling at home but then feeling not quite. It’s a vibe you get where they’re all super happy and Catholic and it’s not the same. [Laughter] I don’t know. I don’t know how to explain it. Do y’all get it?

Participant: Yes.

Participant: It’s like, “I want to be part of you, but I don’t get you.”

Participant: I think the thing is that things feel very insularly focused. Not that you shouldn’t focus on yourself because that’s extremely important. If you’re not doing good, then nothing else will be good. But it’s almost to the point where the physical world does not mean anything and we are only focused on our personal relationship with God and that’s all there is, in a very spiritual, detached sense. It doesn’t beg bigger questions like “So if we have these feelings about human dignity, what does that mean for economic systems in society?” or things like that. If you’d ask that question, they’d just give you this blank look.

Facilitator: [Name] is nodding. [Laughter]

Participant: Vincentians would love that question!

Participant: They’d give you this look like, “What’s this have to do with what the Bible said this week?”

Participant: It can also have sort of a “meet market” feeling, like Catholic singles looking to hook up with other Catholic singles. Okay. [Laughter]

Facilitator: Would they be interested to hear if you’re not Catholic enough?

Participant: Yeah. I feel like that, and I’m married now so it’s okay. [Laughter] But it’s just like when I was going and single, it was just like, “Hey. My name’s so and so.” And I’m like, “Hi. I’m going to go talk to my friends over here now.” So, that feeling can feel sort of icky and would be a reason why I wouldn’t go to something.

Facilitator: Something? You wouldn’t go to something?

Participant: Something like that, where I would anticipate it to have that kind of feeling, like a Theology on Tap.

Facilitator: Okay. A Theology on Tap. Oh, you’re talking about a Theology a Tap.

Participant: Or whatever this volunteer or social thing is that has the potential to feel like that.
Participant: It’s always almost all women, except for myself and [Name]. [Laughter]

Facilitator: He said it’s almost all women except for…?

Participant: Except for myself and my roommate. I want to say like almost all but two times, it’s been like that.

Facilitator: So this is like Theology on Tap here in Chicago. What other groups like that are there that make you feel uncomfortable?

Participant: What’s the one that’s called like…?

Participant: I went to a [Parish] social group once a long time ago and it felt like that.

Participant: I can’t handle [Parish]

Participant: I tagged along to [Parish].

Participant: Oh, gosh! In that church, you kneel at the altar rail. [Laughter]

Facilitator: Kneel, stick out your tongue, and…

Participant: Yeah. It’s very orthodox.

Facilitator: That sort of thing makes you uneasy?

Participant: When I was working at a parish, part of my job was young adult ministry. So I was working collaboratively with other parishes and one of our goals was how do we make this not a “meet market”? How do we make this a place where people can come and build community without having that awkward speed dating feel, which I agree with [Name] is very present in young adult ministries? What we ended up doing is whenever we would meet, we would meet away from the social hall, away from the church, in the cafe. So everyone was sitting around one table and there wasn’t that opportunity to mingle up side by side and get really awkward. And it worked really well. There was some criticism about it from the folks who…

Participant: Who wanted it! [Laughter]

Participant: Who wanted it in the church, in the social hall because they would say, “Oh, but you’re removing us from the holy space of the church.” No, we’re bringing the church to your real life, here in a café. So I don’t know if that benefits this conversation at all.

Participant: I think it does.

Participant: That’s something that’s really effective to build a community away from the physical building of the church.
**Participant:** But still having the heart of what we believe in what we do like the Eucharist and the community and the charism of St. Vincent DePaul. Having all of that there. Louise de Marillac talks about how it’s important to be spiritually nourished by the Eucharist. I think that it’s totally possible to have both. I’m just an ideas person that doesn’t necessarily know how to get ideas happening. [Laughter]

**Participant:** So you’re Strengthsquest is ideation?

**Participant:** I think what I would be concerned about happening if there were to be some kind of Vincentian formation program would be in Chicago – a problem could possibly be for the CCM crowd to come in and have the wagons too tightly circled. Because obviously we want to be welcoming of people from the neighborhood and from the community. So trying to figure how to make it so it’s not like these are our CCM and DePaul grads and this is everybody else. Loosening that up would be a concern of mine.

**Participant:** Yeah.

**Participant:** That’s important.

**Participant:** The “meat market” thing is easy to fix. You either have tough skin or you break someone – boyfriend or not. [Laughter] But I feel like that could be a big problem.

**Facilitator:** This is a terrible last question to ask right before we ask you to leave. But, “Have you or someone you know well from your volunteer service ever thought about entering the priesthood or religious life and if so, how has your volunteer experience influenced your thinking about your vocation to religious life or the priesthood?” And I ask this two minutes before we have to end…

**Participant:** Well. [Laughter] Yeah. I’d say the Vincentians definitely influenced me. I was looking mostly at Ursulines, Dominicans and Franciscans. I teach flute on the side. It’s my other full-time job. I love teaching and education and building little souls [Laughter]. So I always really like the Dominicans. And then I met my first Daughter of Charity. And then there was no question about this community that if I was going to dedicate my life to being in religious life, this is what it would be. Everything fell into place. Meeting with other religious and being like, “Of course my spiritual director’s a Daughter of Charity.” And having them be like, “No. No. No. You don’t want them to pressure you.” And it’s like, “But none of y’all get me.” That constant awareness of service to the poor and whomever the poor may be.

**Facilitator:** I can tell you from my 15 years of living with them service to poor is always right there. Okay. Any of the rest of you...Obviously [Name] is married.

**Participant:** I am.

**Facilitator:** So you won’t be entering a convent any time soon.
**Participant:** Although I met my husband during my year of service [Laughter]. And I think we were both casually discerning religious life. I mean really causally [Laughter]. And then determining when we were in that relationship, not instantly like “Oh my gosh. We’re getting married,” but once we were doing that service program we were heading in a different direction.

**Facilitator:** Do any of you know anyone that began thinking about becoming a priest or a sister or a monk or whatever?

**Participant:** From our service groups specifically?

**Facilitator:** Yeah specifically. You might not but…

**Participant:** Well I have a funny story for you. [Laughter] I was very seriously discerning becoming a Daughter of Charity like [Name]. I was actually on an online discernment retreat like you Skype every week with the Daughter and chat. It was the last day of the discernment retreat and it was somebody’s Feast Day. I don’t know whose Feast Day it was. And I turned on Skype and said, “Sister [Name]! Happy Feast Day!” And she said, “Honey, there’s no hope for you. You’re going to be a Daughter.” And I said, “Unless some sign comes along today, I really think I am.” My now-husband called and asked me out on a date that day. If it hadn’t been for that providential…

**Participant:** I just really like that story. [Laughter]

**Facilitator:** It’s nothing that she said.

**Participant:** But if it hadn’t been for that providential moment and for meeting the absolute right person, I would have been a Daughter. And I think I know more people from DePaul and from the Vincentian charism who have discerned, no matter how casually; whether it’s just “Oh, I could see myself doing that” or having spiritual directors and going on discernment retreats. I think I know more people in the Vincentian charism than anyone else in the Catholic world. Even my husband one time when we came back to Chicago to visit said, “Wow. The Vincentians are doing it right. Do you know how many of your friends were talking about maybe being Daughters of Charity?” And he’s Jesuit, so that was a total win. [Laughter] But I think there’s something very special about the way Vincentians are forming young people that makes them see religious vocation as an opportunity and as a desirable lifestyle versus sacrificing your life for the Church. We’re doing something right, and I think we just need to tap into it a little bit more.

**Facilitator:** And the rest of you?

**Participant:** Well, that’s how I started dating my boyfriend. It’s a hilarious story. The abbreviated version is that we went to Adoration, and we were leaving Adoration. I also lived with him in the V&L House. So we were leaving Adoration and I knew him very well. So I said, “What were you praying on?” And he said, “Seriously, I think I want to be a Vincentian priest.”
And I looked at him and said, “I’ve always thought about being a Daughter.” And we went, and we were on our way to a party. We were picking up a twelve pack [Laughter] and he was saying, “I think it would be so cool.” And we kept talking about, kept talking about it all night. We started drinking and started flirting and a week later we were dating. [Laughter] It’s an ongoing thing, especially for him. He definitely goes back and forth. He feels very drawn to it. But he’s also feels very drawn to…

Facilitator: You [Laughter]

Participant: Not. So it’s interesting.

Facilitator: Does anyone else have friends?

Participant: I knew one person back home, but we don’t really chat much. I noticed it on Facebook one time a couple months ago. That’s about it.

Participant: I have a friend from college who did the V&L House as well, and she was kind of casually discerning the Daughters of Charity but ended up not.

Participant: We all know [Name]. [Laughter]

Participant: Yeah.

Facilitator: Is there anything else that I should have asked that you’d like to add or anything about being a Vincentian volunteer alumni or alumnus or whatever the word is? Silence? That’s fine. You can go over and drink more over at the local bar. But I do want to thank you all for coming and doing this. It’s been great. I’m hoping that our two listeners back there got the appropriate things. I don’t know what you were expecting. But I think you did great. [Laughter] Thanks so much. I’ve been sitting here for the past five minutes totally distracted because there is a Daughter of Charity that [Name] has to meet. And I can’t remember her name. I’ll remember it tonight at midnight. [Laughter]

Participant: You can let us know. We can pass it on.

Facilitator: Yeah. But she’s a professional musician. So anyway. I might email some of my Daughters of Charity and say, “Hey! What’s the name of that person?”

Participant: They all know each other.

Facilitator: Oh yeah. Big time. Talk about major community.

Participant: Yeah. [Laughter]

Facilitator: You’ve always got a batch of people at your back. It’s just really cool. Okay. Thanks so much. Eat the last cookie on your way out.
Unaffiliated Lay Vincentians

Focus Group Two – Chicago

**Facilitator:** So the first question asks about how the volunteer experience was for you, how it affected your life, and why you were doing it.

**Participant:** So I actually wasn’t very active at all in the Vincentian ministry or any service work while I was a student at DePaul. I got in touch with Sr. [Name], who runs and started the Vincentian lay ministry program when I was a senior in college. I was looking to do some sort of service work as I had spent my first three and a half years of adulthood without giving anything back to humanity for the most part. [Laughter] I started to think about what I was going to do post-college. Once I came into contact with Sr. [Name], we kind of fell in love with each other. She was just starting the Kenyan leg of the Vincentian lay missionaries. They had been working in Ethiopia for like four years, maybe not for that long. So myself and a few others ended up doing work in preparation for missionary work and working with the Daughters of Charity out in Kenya and then spending a month there. That was kind of the start of the Kenyan VLM program. Obviously it was one of the most amazing things I have ever done. I have been back three times after. I am doing a fairly intensive fundraising project with [Name] over here. It was exactly what I needed, which is what a lot of people say right after college. It was exactly what I needed to recognize the responsibilities and the privilege I have, having gone to a fairly prestigious Catholic school, just coming from a family that could afford to put me through school and has helped me align most of my life’s missions, how I look at jobs and most things that I have done. I went back to grad school after going to Kenya the second time. I decided to study public policy in large part due to my time in Kenya—thinking about systemic change as opposed to just volunteerism or doing social work or counseling. Those are other tracks that I had thought about. Kenya really made me start to think about systems and how systems of oppression function. I became really interested in policy work and so went back to school for policy all in large part thanks to my time in Kenya with the VLM.

**Facilitator:** A couple of you were nodding. Was it the same for you?

**Participant:** Very similar story. Prior to coming to DePaul—I went for undergraduate and graduate school—I was never really involved in any volunteer work, which surprises me talking about it now. I first got involved with Catholic Campus Ministry here on campus. It was the service work, and the way people were providing service to communities in Chicago that was really attractive to me. It was a different way of volunteering and a different way of giving back. I just caught the Vincentian bug and did everything I could to be involved during my second year, my sophomore year here at DePaul. I lived in the Vincent-Louise house. That same year I went on a service trip to Denver, Colorado. I learned about the Vincentian Colorado volunteer
program. I was thinking about postgraduate, what was I going to do to continue that trend, and that seemed like the perfect opportunity to be involved in some sort of program after I graduated from DePaul. That really shaped me. I did not want to let go of the Vincentian mission after graduation, so it was the perfect transition. At the same time, during that year I also learned that the direct service was very important, but what [Name] was saying, it was also the systems that DePaul really instills on us, looking at the root of the problem. It was during that year that I decided to go back to graduate school and study nonprofit management. Not only being able to hear on a daily basis what the struggles were, either individuals and communities were going through, but looking at how we can collaborate with non-profits, government, and private corporations and how we look at solving all of those issues in a more collaborative way. Not just meeting immediate needs but asking why those immediate needs are there.

Facilitator: Anyone else? Can you talk about how a life choice you made afterwards helped to crystalize it?

Participant: I think for me, being at school and being constantly surrounded by Vincentians and the Vincentian mission, it helps to root your world outlook. For me, that has been one of the things that I have carried out of school the most, is once again looking at the systems and the bigger picture, how everything is connected and what really must be done in order to make change. It was that situation where you can’t escape service projects or Catholic Campus Ministry and that’s how I learned about the Vincentians and the Vincentian mission. And just really what was going on, and that’s how I started volunteering. I also was not volunteering in my earlier part of school. I didn’t start being actively involved until my junior year of college. It was those last two years of college that were my most influential part of my time here. And that’s really because of that mission and to this day I carry that with me.

Facilitator: In just your work?

Participant: I think in my work but mostly in my worldview and in how I interact with others. It’s how you have that one on one interaction and how you approach people and how you approach people’s situations because you are able to see their humanity and their struggles and help be partners with them and not to see the separation, but to see the likeness more than anything.

Participant: As I was listening to both of you, that was exactly my thought, it’s not so much that I was this person and then I went to Kenya and became this kind of person, but it gives you a stake hold, that’s the tent pole that you need to become a Vincentian. I think being in your early to mid-20s is a moment in which you are becoming an adult, figuring out who you are. I am not really sure the kind of person I would have been had I not chosen to do service work. Maybe I would have been a fine person. I am sure I wouldn’t have been a terrible person. [Laughter]. But my life would not have been the way that I interact with people and talk to people. The choices
that I make and what I buy and what I do, would be very different if I hadn’t had that lens handed to me at the age of 22, which was older than a lot of other people even. Even if I never did volunteer work again, I would still be a Vincentian. You kind of can’t shake it once you have that lens placed in front of you.

**Facilitator:** A couple of you nodding over here. [Laughter].

**Participant:** I didn’t come across the Vincentians until my second year of volunteering, so I didn’t kind of have that formation in undergrad. I got into volunteering because after undergrad I was done with studying. I thought I would go do something else. I’ll just go volunteer for a year. Who needs to get a job? Let me go do this. I got halfway through that year, and was like, I didn’t really know what to do, so I said, let me just go do a second year. Some other family-related thing pulled me back from where I was. My dad just happened to see a newspaper article about the Vincentian volunteer program in [Place]. He said, “Hey you should look them up.” I thought it looked nice, but had no idea what I was getting into. My year there, I had no idea. The formative piece of it was the individuals I interacted with who lived with the Vincentian mission. I was privileged that my direct supervisor at work had formerly been in the seminary with the CM’s and everything. His approach, the way that he taught me to look at my work and my year of service, started really to create that. The work that I did doing drug communal health support so naturally brought that idea of looking at systems and living the day-to-day frustrations of navigating our social service support systems. It’s just a nightmare. How do people do this? For me, that’s what fueled it. I can think of very specific client experiences that I had that altered me. This is what I wanted to go to grad school to do. I battled a lot doing public policy and nonprofit management. I didn’t have the heart to try and seek legislative change [Laughter]. I said, “screw it, that’s going to take too long.” That became, how we can as nonprofits operate best in the community? Operate so efficiently and effectively at that frontline level and then over time. One of my friends told me – she’s a former VLM – I should go to Kenya, like you’re not done with the Vincentians. I think it has changed that perspective on life and how you approach relationships and friendships. If you look at the whole Vincentian charism and not just the social justice piece to it. I tell people, you are called to find the face of Christ. Either in that situation or in that person. When you step back a moment, and look at that, if that person, if they don’t know the Vincentian mission, if they are called to find the face of Christ in you, then how are you displaying that? For me, that has been where that thought of it makes sense and how I come to live out that charism and that mission.

**Facilitator:** It changes your life choice and your relationships, but that’s sort of changing your spirituality as well. Is that the case for the rest of you?

**Participant:** Service work was not something that was a part of my faith growing up, so the first time I was introduced to service and Catholicism was through a Vincentian lens. For me, it was
doing Vincentian service that brought service into my faith life at all. And now, I couldn’t imagine my faith without the service, because at this point they are so integrated, serving people and having that be my expression of faith and religion and spirituality. I don’t know what my faith would look like right now if I hadn’t found the Vincentians.

**Participant:** I think that my spirituality really evolved throughout college experiences and post-grad. It went more from a personal relationship with God and with Christ to a more communal one. Whether that be somebody that I was working with one on one, like a stranger or a client, or an entire community, hearing their stories and struggles. It made me feel like [Name] had been saying, finding Christ in that person, how you are displaying Christ to others, trying to instill the image of Christ into a community. It is transformative in that way too.

**Facilitator:** A lot of you are still doing Vincentian-type stuff. What kinds of activities exactly?

**Participant:** [Name] and I are working on our fundraising for the VLM in several projects with two different sites in Kenya. We had made a commitment to our respective sites to help support them. They provide more education opportunities for young kids and also some business opportunities for women. I think that both of us realize that after this where we were both in Kenya, for the first time together, we had never been in country at the same time together. We didn’t really know each other, like six months ago. We both knew that we weren’t going to be able to go back this coming year and yet there was still this thought that I can’t not do something, I can’t not stay connected to this place, to these people, and to this organization that is so important and has afforded me so many opportunities. There is this draw to being a part of the Vincentian community that makes you want to keep working and keep living your charism in a very active way. We have all been saying, once you become a Vincentian, it doesn’t matter what you do, even if you don’t do anything with social service work, you will always be able to relate to people and understand people in a different way. I think having that lens and being part of that community makes you want to keep doing the stuff, keep being an active member. This is the best we can do right now, is to do it from afar. It has helped me at least reconnect with all of the VLM alums that I had kind of been removed from the community for a little bit. I find myself feeling very connected to people all over the country, which is very comforting.

**Facilitator:** This is volunteering in addition to whatever jobs you have?

**Participants:** Yeah. [Laughter]

**Facilitator:** The rest of you, have you all done something to keep up the connections that you would like to?

**Participant:** I intentionally chose and waited, working in a nonprofit job in Chicago were far and wide at the time I finished. I went back to a place to work at where I would get to live out
that Vincentian approach to work and service, wanting to come back to Chicago, I knew that there were very few organizations that I was willing to come back and work for. A huge part of that was that I wanted it to be connected to the Vincentian mission somehow. I appreciated the approach I was taking, not only the direct work but also the sustainability piece. If we are going to create a nonprofit organization somehow, whatever the thing is that it is sustainable. You think in 2010, it was the 350th anniversary of Vincent’s and Louise’s death, and what they created back then a lot of it is still going on. To me that was really important, to be in a place where you know it is going to leave something behind you. You’re always chasing to put yourself out of business to some degree – we’ll probably never get there. For me it was very key in knowing as I entered my later young adult life, later 20’s and my early 30’s, of being in a place that I think complemented what was so important to me personally.

Facilitator: A couple of you are nodding, and I didn’t want to leave anybody out.

Participant: I work with [Name] at the St. Vincent DePaul center. [Laughter].

Participant: Yeah, we’re an incestuous crowd. [Laughter].

Facilitator: So your job-job is actually Vincentian?

Participant: Yeah, when I came back from VLM in Kenya, I was working at a catering company for a couple of months, and it was miserable. [Name] was actually the one who told me about the job at the St. Vincent DePaul center, where I had previously volunteered when I was in undergrad. [Laughter] It’s a separate organization just a couple of blocks away where there is a childhood center for low-income parents, outreach services for people who are homeless, and senior support services as well. So I work in the child development center as their admissions coordinator. Having loved Kenya and coming back and not being really happy in Chicago, in the city I had previously loved for undergrad, it has been great to be back in a Vincentian organization and even on the days where I hate my job or just really don’t want to talk to parents anymore, to be able to take that breath and stop and remember why I am doing what I am doing. I am getting paid to care about people, which is an awesome space to be in. I have never gotten paid for caring about people before, it’s always been for free. [Laughter]. It’s nice to be in a professional setting but also in a personal setting that I want to be in as far as being in a Vincentian organization.

Participant: I’m in a situation where I don’t have an active service project or an active peace or community in which I am involved with outside of my parish which also just happens to be Vincentian. Shocking, really. [Laughter]. Being active there, and I do feel that draw, that once I stabilize other portions of my life, of wanting to find that service again. To find that community, that I am drawn to and craving that ability to serve others and to be involved again in the things that I was doing in undergrad.
**Facilitator:** What is it exactly about Vincentian service that is so appealing? Instead of Jesuit volunteers, for example, or LaSalle? [Laughter].

**Participant:** I don’t know, I think it’s the relationship piece. When was trying to decide on graduate schools, I applied to four different ones, and I still came back to DePaul, because I knew that wanting to be in the nonprofit world, I wanted to have the relationship and not just task-oriented and not just research-oriented. Even choosing my current job in a social service center, reading the mission and the description, I knew that it was the right job for me because the mission statement includes walking with people on their journey toward self-sufficiency.

**Facilitator:** And this is a Vincentian center?

**Participant:** Nope. [Place] is a nonprofit founded by the Presbyterian Church. The focus of our nonprofit seems very Vincentian to me, recognizing the strengths within people and the people who are risk of poverty and homelessness, really empowering them, giving them a hand-up versus a hand-out.

[Late Arrival enters]

**Facilitator:** This is [Name]?

**Participant:** Yes. Sorry I’m late.

**Facilitator:** You folks obviously know her already, anybody here who you don’t know?

**Participant:** No, I have met all of these people [Laughter].

**Facilitator:** Otherwise, I was going to have them introduce themselves to you, but that seem a little superfluous. We are basically talking about what attracts people to Vincentian service, either in their time as volunteers or now several folks are involved in some way or other with Vincentian service.

**Participant:** When [Name] was speaking something occurred to me. The drawback to it almost is just kind of broad. They have this tagline of serving the poor, however you want to define it. That’s what I connected with, and what brings me back is that there’s a place for everybody amongst it all. I think that in my experiences, having been taught that, learning then how to connect with other people. I have made great friends with people, who if I had met them through something outside the Vincentian, probably would not be friends. I would maybe put up with them, socialize with them, but you know it just kind of brings you together in a different way. It challenges you to remove yourself from where you are at comfortably. Sort of just being in this Vincentian environment. I always notice that there’s this shift when you gather for something Vincentian, or even if you’re with one or two others. For me, that’s the draw, that it’s just so
broad. And it’s welcomed that however you connect to this mission, and no one’s going to tell you that you’re not connecting right.

**Facilitator:** Is there anything that can make it difficult for you to stay involved? Challenges and obstacles you face as a lay person with the desire to grow in the Vincentian mission? Is there anything that keeps you from being involved in issues that you would like? Or something that is missing?

**Participant:** I feel like it’s hard since I work with now in advertising. I used to work in theatre. Choosing a path that is not directly related to the social services for a career, at least at this stage of the game, finding that time outside of work and outside of direct relationship obligations to make a commitment to service or to a project or to an organization, can be hard to find one that is compatible that also still is fulfilling for what I want to be doing. Piggybacking on the other question, Vincentian service feels to me like a partnership, like [Name] was saying, and so many volunteerism projects feel like they borderline on the handout, that savior, that, “I am going to swoop in because I know better because I’m the volunteer and I shall take care of you.” And that’s not what I am looking for, that’s not what I want. I want that partnership, and I think that’s why it’s seeking out those Vincentian opportunities in order to be able to do that. There are many and yet few at the same time.

**Facilitator:** Few because?

**Participant:** They’re connected to universities or to organizations that already have a full roster of people within the community. Or they’re outside of travel patterns.

**Participant:** Yeah that’s true, but then I feel like I’m making excuses.

**Participant:** Well I can see that point, I am a VLM alum, and I am engaged and have this set community. I think that it’s not by coincidence that a lot of people that do the Colorado Service Corp or even the JVC, or what Jenny did in St. Louis. I never know any of these acronyms because these are not communities I function in. Oftentimes, once you do one you end up doing many. You’re right, you have one community which connects you to another community. And so, if you find yourself outside of those communities, I’ve never experienced that after college, but I can imagine that that could be difficult to find your community as an outsider. They have set themselves up, and they are there and they do things together, and I am sure it is possible, but I can imagine.

**Facilitator:** What could be done to address that? Any ideas? If you had to advise some guru on Vincentian volunteers, after being a volunteer, what would you suggest them doing?
**Participant:** Well, I totally agree that it is difficult having lived in two Vincentian communities and afterwards you finish the year with all this bitter sweetness because you had this wonderful experience and you can’t have it again, and you’ll never have it again. You try your best and it’s more of the accountabilities not found within that structure anymore, so the accountability is with each relationship and partnership, but I know that with CVV, [Name], one of the directors, has done a great job of creating little reunions among CV volunteers - Colorado Vincentian volunteers - when he does his recruitment trail around the states, he also comes to Chicago and says, “Hey Chicago CVV alums, let’s all get together to talk and reflect.” That’s one of him to do [this]. Its like, how do we do it as adults who are responsible for doing that ourselves too?

**Facilitator:** Or is there anything that some central person who runs the whole Vincentian volunteers could do? Would that be something people would be interested in?

**Participant:** A lot of things that people say, I’m a Masters student here at DePaul in women’s and gender studies. I have part time job and a graduate assistantship, and between all of that I don’t have a lot of extra time, and I find myself naturally moving into new communities with people that I am working with every day. A lot of that strong sense of Vincentian connection goes away a little bit.

**Facilitator:** If you could design an ideal way of keeping people connected, what would that look like? Extracting from the question that nobody has any time. [Laughter].

**Participant:** With today’s technology, it would be nice to have some of central alumni or current volunteer network or cloud-based system to connect and share. This [could be some sort of] communal blog and you can find people. At least that’s a good way to find community again and create opportunities again and connect.

**Participant:** Create projects and create consistency.

**Participant:** Or to create consistent meet-ups. At least ten people come together every third Saturday afternoon and go do these things or come together to reflect. Something that has started and given out as people are transitioning into alumni status is speaking of DePaul very specifically. If you are not choosing a one-year program to have this new connection and network that you can go into and then grow with as you go through things, you are still part of a community and you are still finding ways to serve others while getting your feet together as well.

**Participant:** Yeah this will sound very trite, but [Name] and I were talking about using social media to your advantage when you are doing fundraising. I moved into a new neighborhood and was looking for apartments and ended up stumbling upon this community of [Place] Facebook page, and I promise will connect to Vincentian in a second [Laughter]. It’s amazing, It’s just this place and people post, “Hey in the neighborhood this is going on, or hey there’s this opportunity
to help clean up the park, let’s all help clean up our park.” I can imagine that being a very useful tool for people, easy to find, and you opt-in and then it’s there. When you are looking for something, maybe you make friends from that or maybe you just check out what’s on their page, what events they have, and if you have a free Saturday, or feel like you need to do some work, it’s there for you. It would be very free-form, but I have been amazed by how much stuff my little neighborhood gets done by putting a call out to people that have chosen to join this Facebook page. I know that that will restrict it to people who are on Facebook, but I think that people not on Facebook are becoming fewer and fewer, especially at DePaul.

Facilitator: I have no idea by the way, this is not a leading question, but in addition to opportunities for service like that, would opportunities for prayer or for study of the Vincentian charism as well, be interesting as well? I am not expecting the “yes” answer. Feel free to say no. [Laughter].

Participant: I think that it is so easy to find the volunteer opportunities. I think that it is difficult to find the intentional prayer opportunities. That takes a lot commitment and trial and error, sometimes, especially after graduating from DePaul. We had our little community within St. Vincent’s for the student Mass. [Name] and I go to the Sunday Mass at St. Vincent’s, but it’s different now.

Facilitator: Why?

Participant: I forced myself to church-shop for a parish that was closer to my apartment or trying to start a life and not stay remaining in college. After an entire summer of trying different churches, I ended up figuring out that my spiritual home was at St. Vincent’s parish. That had a lot to do with the fact that it was Vincentian as well as many other factors not related to this conversation. It has been the best choice. I have been an active parishioner for four or five years. It is my spiritual home.

Participant: Still home, it’s just a different sense of home.

Facilitator: In what way?

Participant: When I think about the student Mass, I attach it to the community that we built within Catholic Campus Ministry and the specific events that would go along with that. I was at a point where I was finding my faith a lot, we are all still finding our faith. But we have a different understanding now.

Participant: And it’s unique because when you’re a college student, especially in that community, you’re all mostly within the same age range, going through the same things, and so
it’s a very specific context since everybody’s one the same page. When you graduate, everyone starts looking very very different.

**Facilitator:** And there’s no opportunities in the city for something like that, for young adults who are out of college? I don’t know. [Laughter].

**Participant:** We can still technically go to the student Mass. [Laughter]

**Participant:** At other parishes, you can definitely seek it out. To find that community, it might be a little harder finding one that you fit in with. Sometimes if you’ve done a year of service or if you’ve had multiple opportunities doing service or having this formation piece, I find for me, connecting to people who haven’t, like when I say, “oh I lived in community,” people look at you differently. Not different in the sense of bad, but there’s a kind of bridge then and where you meet on the bridge of understanding in a way. And so I think that one thing for me that I found common, like [Name] and I church-shopped when I came back, ended up settling at St. Vincent’s. It was that even if people hadn’t participated in a service program, somehow they had been touched by this Vincentian charism and the spirit, so they could – it was a little easier – build that relationship and get to know them. There’s a certain openness. I found that in other places and different times and different walks in my life, when you begin explain to someone that you worked for a year and you didn’t get paid, [Laughter], the type of work that you did and the what you are doing now, you become kind of mystical to them, they just don’t get it. They keep asking questions in hope of understanding. Sometimes, it is just easier to go back to a place where you are understood. You don’t have to do a lot of explaining.

**Facilitator:** I have two more questions. Sometimes you hear a common expression people say is that they are spiritual but not religious, what does that mean to you?

**Participant:** For me, it means that they choose to believe that there is something greater at work, but they don’t necessarily believe in a religious doctrine.

**Facilitator:** Did you ever see that applying to you? Or any thought within the Vincentian thing? Did it apply or not apply?

**Participant:** For me, becoming a part of a Vincentian community helped me go from somebody – I don’t mean to imply that having that mentality is bad at all – but for me it was a manifestation of my immaturity with my relationship with religion. I think it’s a common mentality, like “Look at all the bad that happens with organized religion. Let me distance myself by saying, no, I believe in a lot of the things that maybe different religions may encompass, but look at what the Catholic Church has done, look at this, look at what is happening in Middle East, so I am going to say that I am none of those things.” That may not be everybody, but that was certainly my reasoning for that when I was 18 or 19. Being a part of the Vincentian community taught me that
my religion is through living Christ. That made it much easier for me to have a relationship both with the Church and with Christ. The people who don’t necessarily adhere to the same faith as me, or any faith at all, realizing that the doctrine of it is important, but being able to live and walk in Christ’s footsteps as closely as I can was a way to get me back to the Catholic Church. It has helped me a lot when I struggled with different aspects of the doctrine.

Facilitator: Anybody else?

Participant: I think I am the reverse. I majored in Catholic Studies here at DePaul and was very involved here in Catholic Campus Ministry. I spent a lot of time at church and on retreats. Also part of it is that now where I am at, a lot of people I am around have been really negatively impacted by the Church.

Facilitator: And where are you?

Participant: Women’s and Gender Studies.

Facilitator: Oh my, yeah, okay.

Participant: Yeah [laughter]. So there’s a lot of people who are sort of trying to figure out what their relationship is to it. I wouldn’t say that I’ve lost it, but I am in that space where I don’t know what I think about it all. I do think that Vincentianism is not so much about holding a tagline as it is about being part of a community and what Christ calls you to do within the community. I think that’s helpful, it feels less exclusionary when you don’t know what you think about this right now, which is good.

Facilitator: I see people nodding their heads.

Participant: I think for me it has provided that space to stay connected from when I first went to college. Going and being in [Place], most people are cradle Catholics. Because [Place] is a very Catholic city. When I was looking at college, 7 percent of our college campus [was Catholic], but we were a Catholic university. There was still that strong presence, but there was a journey along after that and after the university. Once I started working with the Vincentian mission, it provided me with a greater understanding of my faith and connection to my religion. It kept me wanting to explore that. Sometimes I wonder if I hadn’t done that, would I still be involved in it? I have no idea.

Facilitator: Do you know anybody, probably friends or anybody else for who that is true? That they are not involved now, other than the Women’s Studies Department of course. [Laughter]

Participant: Not everybody in there but many.
Participant: I would say that most of my close friends would identify as spiritual but not religious. I identify as Christian, but not with any specific denomination right now. I always get frustrated with older generations are like, “Oh those Millennials can’t commit to anything and say that they are spiritual but not religious.” Granted it’s all my friends, I feel like it’s a very valid place to be. There’s something more going on besides just the mess of humanity, but I am not going to subscribe to any one definition, or any one doctrine, or any one church body that is going to make me commit to going to church or the temple every week. Being in a Vincentian organization it’s interesting because being Catholic is being very committed to religion. Being Vincentian can be a whole entirely different thing. I think that for me, when I got into Vincentian service, I wasn’t identifying with the Catholic aspects of it, although I did end up living in two very Catholic communities, but I was identifying more with the Vincentian aspects of it and layering that into the Christianity that I had been raised in. And now I’m in this weird space where I am Christian and Vincentian but don’t subscribe to anything more particular than that.

Participant: I think the point that I was poorly making was that Vincentianism has allowed me to realize that there is so much more to Christianity and religion than going to Church, saying the rosary, and doing confession. You can embody this lifestyle and that can be your definition. There is still a space like that. The Vincentian community is so open to that. The people that I have found myself socializing with and associating with tend to be younger people who are very open to criticism towards the Church and Vincentianism in and of itself. That has made me feel more comfortable about where I sit in my religion in any point in time that I had felt prior.

Participant: I feel like at least in my encounters with people who choose to say that they are spiritual but not religious, make that choice very intentionally. It is not a flip thing that they just say. People who say that they are atheist or agnostic feels very much like, “I just had to pick a box, and I did.” The people who are saying that they are spiritual but not religious have given thought to it and may not agree with the way the religion presents itself in our world and may have a lot of qualms with whatever religion they were raised in, but they still hold on to those fundamental core beliefs. The people that I know, it is being exposed to Vincentianism that has helped them reflect and realize this about themselves and has helped them work through their anger or their hurts to find where they are now.

Participant: The Vincentian piece, like everyone has been saying, provides that different outlook or that way of living. Religion can very much, like [Name] started saying, seem like doctrine, which in society’s view closes you off from thinking on a more personal or individualized level. Religion provides that community, but only if you share that same belief with everybody else in that community. The Vincentian piece allows that inclusion and a different way of life.
**Facilitator:** Do you or anyone that you know from volunteer or service ever think about entering the religious life or priesthood? In your volunteer experience, did you or anyone you know think about those things?

**Participant:** We always joked about it. [Laughter].

**Participant:** I’ve thought about it off and on for myself, not so much anymore.

**Participant:** Not for me myself, but I know there’s definitely been people that have come and gone through my Vincentian volunteer life that I could very much see the other person. [Name] and I were both in Kenya this past summer. I could very much see the third person in our group.

**Facilitator:** I think you can see [Name] doing it… [Laughter].

**Participant:** You know what? I am not going to close the door to that. But not for the most part, no.

**Facilitator:** Some people say that people do become volunteers because they are thinking about that, and if they weren’t when they started then they do later on.

**Participant:** Not for my communities.

**Participant:** There are people in my community who had thought about it. None of them had started their year of service because they were thinking about it.

**Facilitator:** Maybe when they met Sr. [name]. [Laughter].

**Participant:** That’s actually true for one of my friends. [Laughter].

**Facilitator:** Really?

**Participant:** Yeah.

**Facilitator:** What caused them to think that way?

**Participant:** They’re still discerning. I think that it’s a lot of being exposed to Vincentian charism during school and working really closely with CM’s and Daughters and seeing what religious life can be and all of the opportunities that it can provide especially in a Vincentian context to really work and to do meaningful work. That has caused this particular friend to really go through the discernment process. But also I have also watched other friends, especially in school, have that time of reflection of, “is this maybe a path for me or not?” I don’t know if that would have been the case in a different circumstance.
**Facilitator:** One last question, which is, what are your hopes and expectations for the relationship with the Vincentian mission in the future? Or to other Vincentian volunteers which you have served with? You may have answered this already, but nevertheless if you have anything else to say about it… As you look down the alleyway of the 30’s, 40’s, and 50’s. [Laughter]… Any hopes and dreams?

**Participant:** I hope that it remains a supportive network of people that is often invisible to me but pops up when I need something. That’s either through my active searching, emailing and asking for money or sometimes it is just serendipity. So I hope that that remains the case. I imagine that my active engagement in some of my Vincentian volunteer activities will wax and wane throughout my life. I have always felt that no matter what, there is this added support network and wherever I stand with my religious life, there is still this support network. I feel a lot of comfort from that. I have been able to make more adventurous decisions that I may not have otherwise made had that community not been there.

**Participant:** I hope that it’s a constant. That it’s a thing that is always there, and I hope that it grows, becomes stronger and more predominant. Even if I am 40 or 50 or 80, that that is still part of my life and my spirituality and a part of how I see the world.

**Participant:** I hope it doesn’t become stagnant or just lose touch with it. I was just talking to my supervisor today at work. Since I am in a managerial role, I do not have as much direct interaction with our guests as much. Our interns do all the time, and I realized the other day that I spent 45 minutes listening to a man that had previously been in a mental institution. At the end of the 45 minutes, if an intern had done that, they probably think, “This was a waste of my time. I just didn’t understand anything he was talking about.” But talking about it with my supervisor, and she told me that I had just provided a service of being there and listening. That’s something that I did not think of. It’s my day-to-day job. It’s my job to listen to somebody speak for 45 minutes about something that doesn’t make sense. It’s something I believe that needs to be there regardless, being mindful of how I can do that even when I am not aware.

**Facilitator:** Do you have any hopes or expectations for your relationship with your parish or the Church?

**Participant:** I like what Pope Francis is doing [Laughter].

**Facilitator:** It’s okay to say nothing, that’s fine. Anything else? Thank you very much for coming and doing this.
Facilitator: The first thing I am asking you about is the experience you had. Did it affect your life in any way? What ways did it change you?

Participant: I’m just not sure how to answer, only because I didn’t have a necessarily experience with volunteers. I wouldn’t call myself a volunteer.

Facilitator: But you were on that VITAL program. Maybe the better thing to do would be to ask how the VITAL experience shaped who you are and affected you. Maybe that would work.

Participant: For me, the VITAL experience and all my experiences at St. John’s, dealing specifically with the Vincentian mission, helped me to really look at how I treat people, both those I am serving and in service with and also understanding the purpose of what I am doing and how it is a part of God’s plan. Really looking at that would be an important part of what I learned.

Facilitator: Anybody else? I thought I saw some nods going.

Participant: I think what I learned from doing Vincentian service through a plunge, like [Name] I went to [City], is that Vincentian service, the charism is different because it involves a certain level of reflection after the service. In order that you might be changed by your experiences that you had. The only way that it is Vincentian service is if you are changed by that, and if you do find God through that experience.

Participant: Either my experiences, especially in terms of looking at the charism through the lens of leadership in particular, for me shaped not only my time at St. John’s but my now time at St. John’s as an employee with a better understanding of the responsibility of leadership and the character of servant leadership. Really how that should influence all of the roles that we have and everything that we do. For me it’s more that the Vincentian charism’s effect on my life is really just a worldview that allows you to rethink the experiences that you have through a different lens. Trying to look at things through the eyes of the poor in particular is a great gift that I got from St. John’s.

Facilitator: Any particular effect that it had on your relationships with other people, like [Name] has already mentioned. Or on your spirituality and ideas of God that way.

Participant: For me, because I had done a lot of very different volunteer opportunities, I not only see Vincentian charism in the service that I have done, but also the Catholic piece. It’s universal whether it’s here in the United States, or in Panama, or in France, or in Kenya. It’s the same Church. One of the questions that during reflection is always asked, “Where do you see the face of God during service?” To me, it depends on whom I’m serving. The image is very different every time, but it is still God.
Facilitator: Did any of your experiences of VITAL affect the life choice that you made, what you decided to do with your life? You had all these experiences as undergrads, right? Did it affect what you decided to do after you graduated?

Participant: The fourth year of VITAL is vocation. Really thinking about what it is that God has planned for you. During my senior year, I was a complete mess. I had this idea of what I wanted to do, but I wasn’t sure how to go about it. I wasn’t sure that it was the right path for me, and I think that because I was open to the idea of really letting God speak to me in different ways, I was able to sort of figure it out. I hope that I did the right thing, but I think so.

Facilitator: Anybody else have anything?

Participant: I’m one of the people who kind of never left. I really went from being a student to being an employee. For me even though, I agree with [Name], especially in the discernment piece, though I didn’t necessarily say that I had the intention of becoming a campus minister or work at St. John’s, because I had known the charism so well, it made me feel like I was home in a real way. Making that transition, it’s been a wonderful transition, of being someone receiving the mission to someone who is an agent of that mission, a co-worker with the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity and the other lay Vincentians here. In that sense, my experiences as an undergraduate really helped me and supported that.

Participant: To piggy-back off [Name], not having gone here as a student but having gone through the employee formation, I had that same feeling. I worked in very different departments. I worked in student affairs and athletic before this. Having gone through that, looking at the same place where I was working and understanding, “Wow, this is what we do when we say Vincentian. This is why we are committed to working with the types of students we are committed to, the different resources we have.” It just shifted my whole view in terms of what I can do for work. Now that I work with helping directly to carry out that mission and helping others to understand that mission, I tell people what I get to do and I get paid for it. Like, “really? You get paid for doing that?” You do service with people, you talk about things that are much more personal and deeper than what a lot of other people get to do. It completely shifted vocationally.

Facilitator: Other people nodding. Let’s give you a chance to speak.

Participant: My senior year of college I finally did my student teaching and realized, “Okay, this is what I wanted to do with my life.” Thankfully, I had that. Before that I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do and then once I began actually teaching and being a teacher, I really cemented for me this idea of my call to help students. For the last three years I have been a service homeroom teacher, which means I actually lead students at my school on different service trips and different experiences. It is my way of infusing the Vincentian mission into a school that is not Vincentian.

Facilitator: Is it Catholic?

Participant: It is Catholic. It’s an all-girls Catholic run by the Josephites, who have a different charism but are open to service. I myself personally include the idea of reflection into the service
experiences that my students are doing. Oftentimes, in many case even in Catholic schools, it’s more like, “Okay, let’s just do, but let’s not really think about why we are doing.” “Where is our faith in what we are doing?” I really try to instill that into my students so that they have that piece as well.

**Facilitator:** Any particular experience that you had that stands out in your mind from VITAL or other experiences or whatever that you are always going remember? Or really crystalizes the whole thing for you?

**Participant:** The first midnight run experience that I had as an undergraduate student.

**Facilitator:** Midnight run, is that on the subways?

**Participant:** We use vans, but we prepare food here – bagged food, clothing, and other necessities – then we get into vans and go into Manhattan to serve along various stops in New York City to serve food and clothing and fellowship with the homeless on the streets. That’s our – without getting too Campus ministry – by far our most successful service program. We have waiting lists and waiting lists for students to go on them. We have – I don’t know how many a week – and we have four. I feel very fortunate as an undergraduate to have had that experience. For me, especially the leaders that I had – by the leaders I mean the students that led me on that experience – seeing them being maybe only a year older than me but having such a grasp of Vincentian service and being able to pass that along to us and invite us into that. That understanding that if you are Vincentian, this is just what you do. This is just the beginning of the life in service.

**Facilitator:** The next question was that now that you’ve finished, except for those still working here, now that you’re not doing that kind of volunteer work anymore, what other Vincentian activities have you been involved in after the volunteer experience? You may not have been involved in anything. Well, obviously three of you work here, so that kind of limits it to two people, not to put you on the spot or anything. [Laughter].

**Participant:** Just being friends with Vincentians. [Laughter]. [Name] is the queen of that.

**Participant:** I don’t know if I could say that there has been a particular Vincentian event that I go to regularly that is directly correlated with the charism, I can’t say that for sure. But I know that I still do a lot of things that have, I think, the Vincentian charism behind them. Whether it is going to the soup kitchen every week with my students, that to me is a very Vincentian event that I am a part of. I couldn’t say specifically where the Vincentians specifically are running in.

**Facilitator:** They’re not or they are?

**Participant:** They aren’t. In what I have been able to do, being a full time teacher in a school that is not Vincentian. [Laughter].

**Participant:** Even for the people who work here, just being at St. John’s doesn’t necessarily translate to any kind of Vincentian involvement or experience, even as a campus minister. The program that [Name] helps to run I am actually a part of this year. I am still going through the
Vincentian mission certificate program. I know a lot of people would say, “Why did you want to be a part of that? You did the whole Vincentian thing.” Well, I still need to be formed as an adult. I still need to learn and have these experiences in light of the experiences I had since I was 19 years old. That’s something that I am doing and am very grateful that that’s available to do that. I don’t know if I would have found a Vincentian experience outside of that.

**Participant:** Well, uh…

**Facilitator:** Actually, you just graduated, so it really isn’t fair. So in your future, what are you planning on doing?

**Participant:** Over the summer, I was a part of the VLM. I really found a Vincentian community outside of St. John’s. It’s very supportive. There’s retreat every fall and summer time, so at the end of June, we are going to have the 10th anniversary for the VLM program, and I will be there. It is something that I’m really passionate about. It’s something that I want to continue on even when I do move to [State].

**Facilitator:** Would you describe this alum program?

**Participant:** When you are a part of the VLM program, you make this commitment – not put on paper but for yourself – that you want to be a part of the program and always be connected to the people that you served in Kenya. Whether it is going back or trying to find different projects to start up. Our retreat in October was a post-service retreat, which also focused on projects that the sisters wanted us to start there. One of the groups in [Place] is doing this program called Chi to Nai on a bike. The project is that they ride bicycles for 8,000 miles; that’s the distance from Chicago to Nairobi and raise $8,000 to the end of the year. All that money would be divided up between all the Kenya locations. That’s pretty exciting that that’s happening, not just St. John’s but nationwide.

**Facilitator:** There is a group in New York somewhere that meets?

**Participant:** No, not like a group per se. But I know the people that are in the area because a lot of them are from St. John’s or alums from St. John’s that took part in this program. I know them because of that, not necessarily established an alum group of the program.

**Facilitator:** Are any of the rest you involved with the folks who were in the VITAL program or something else when you were here?

**Participant:** Yeah, like friends.

**Facilitator:** I thought they said you were the friend queen? [Laughter].

**Participant:** I don’t know why they said that. Most of my friends currently are people that I met through my service and VITAL experiences. In a way, that has always bonded us and connected us. I have a good friend who lives in [State], so I don’t see her since I live in New York. We are constantly in touch in that way, talking about different service opportunities that she is involved
in. It is constant discussions for us and many for my friends is like, “What are you doing? What’s going on in your life? Where do you see God in your world?”

**Participant:** One of the things for me that comes up a lot and that I hear a lot from people who we work with is that some of these programs make the Vincentians or the Daughters of Charity, more regular, if you can say that. Almost like when you were talking about friends, looking at [Name] thinking. Gosh, one of our Vincentians always talks about [Name] as her friend. He says, “My friend [Name].” I think that’s kind of a mutual thing. There’s a number of people on campus who often say that feel like maybe growing up they had a different relationship with their priest or their nun. But now they are just like, “oh no that’s just whoever they might be, like Fr. [Name].” Someone that they can connect with a lot more. I know that was true for me, and I hear it often enough that it feels like that’s one of those pieces that I wouldn’t have expected, but it really grows out of this.

**Facilitator:** Any other ways that you are or would like to be connected with alumni now that you are out of these programs?

**Participant:** I would love if there was some kind of group to join, but not necessarily affiliated with St. John’s specifically because that’s kind of my whole life. Something bigger than that, with a larger Vincentian connect, but there kind of isn’t. That would be great, and a lot of my friends and family would be interested in that.

**Facilitator:** It’s obviously a challenge, the time and that sort of thing. What are some of the challenges that people would feel about getting involved with something like that?

**Participant:** I don’t know. I don’t think there wouldn’t be challenges, but I think that when we had – I don’t remember how many years ago it was – there was a VITAL reunion at some point. I want to say that it might have been 2007 or something like that. There was a VITAL reunion, and it was ten years, maybe a little bit less than ten years of people. [Laughter].

**Participant:** They’re making faces because they don’t remember [Laughter].

**Participant:** There was some kind of VITAL reunion, and it was just kind of a Mass and people talked after. One of the questions was, “how are you living out the mission?” To hear people who are the teachers, making those connections but then other people who say, “I am working in corporate America, and I am trying: my office goes down to the food bank, and I try to do that.” There always seems to be a yearning for an invitation. To say, I want to do service in general, but I don’t really know how to make that happen. Whenever there’s something from St. John’s, when we invite alumni to do something, there is always such a big response because people have such an affinity for wanting to come home. Especially now starting to see the Vincentians on a bigger scale, brings in awareness of, “there’s more out there than just the people on this campus.”

**Facilitator:** Has anybody else heard those kinds of things from other people that you met in the program or others about wishing…
Participant: That was one of the biggest fears for me in graduating. “Where was I going to have community like the one I had at St. John’s, specifically the Vincentian community that I had formed?” There was always that fear and even now – how many years am I out – I graduated 4 years ago. My graduate experience is not like my undergrad experience. That’s just something that can’t be when you’re working full time. What I miss and I still do is just not having people there. I am no longer working a college schedule. I’m not saying in college you have ample amounts of free time, but you really do. There’s just a lot more freedom in college. Every day I have to be at work and every day there’s a certain time I have to leave work. When I am coming home from work, I am doing my work more so. It’s just the life of a teacher. Having opportunities, having things that are planned would be great. But it couldn’t be something that you tell somebody about a day before and expect them to show up. There would have to be more planed and more intricate. It’s just a question of who would take on that on.

Facilitator: Anybody else that have notice the same kind of yearning or desire or something?

Participant: I keep going back to the same program that I have worked with. I would definitely say that, it’s a 16-month program, and after the 16-months the number of people that will always ask, “What can we do?” We are currently in the eighth cohort and there are seven that are completed. We constantly get questions of, “oh, what do you have for alumni?” But to your point, sometimes we will plan things and people will say, “Oh, that’s such a great idea, but I can’t make it.” Or “How about you plan?” and then we go plan it, and they’re not able to make it. The reality of what people are able to do versus… I know they love that connection, but I don’t know what would bring people together. It has to be very easy to come to and be involved in. We haven’t figured it out yet, but I definitely hear that a lot.

Facilitator: If you could design the ideal thing to keep people, the alumni, involved, what would it look like?

Participant: I would love some way to be able to – not officially – publicly commit myself to the Vincentian mission other than calling myself Vincentian and saying “you’re it, you’re Vincentian.” Which I feel like I am. [Laughter].

Facilitator: A special tag. [Laughter].

Participant: In a way that says that you are, not necessarily you go to this many meetings or whatever, but just a way to say that this is something I am going to bring out into the world through my life with and whatever I am doing, some kind of commitment I can make that is in a recognized way, feeling like I have that community where I go of other people that have committed to that in different ways. I don’t know if I am necessarily looking for…

Facilitator: Like a pledge or something?

Participant: I’m thinking more like an actual commitment of “I’m doing this, working on a project.” Even if it is a whole year or two year project that you’re working on, it is something that will eventually come to fruition through the work that you do with other people. If you made
that commitment, it doesn’t require a due next week, it can be a process that you have over time to do and to commit to.

**Facilitator:** Anybody else? If you had to design something. Especially [Name], you are going to go to [State] or [State], if you had to design the perfect thing to keep you connected down there, what would it look like? Because Lord, who knows if there are any Vincentians in [State]?

**Participant:** Well, I found out there is actually. [Laughter]. Next town over, I found that out. I don’t know, logically the next step for me would be to become some sort of leader or create some sort of project, but I have never been in that role before. That would be kind of a scary thing to start all by myself in [Place]. [Laughter]. Trying to even find young-ish people who do have that Vincentian charism, already exposed to them. Or if I would have to expose it to them. All those different kinds of questions that is very overwhelming. Even for myself going somewhere new, like what you were saying, after your time at St. John’s you made a community here, a Vincentian community. I am going to lose that too, going through the process is a lot.

**Facilitator:** So what could somebody, [Name], no, in her free time. [Laughter]. Maybe the head of the Vincentian priests or whatever or somebody, what could be done – that’s better – to make it less daunting. “I don’t feel like I can be a leader and start something in [Place] all by myself.” What would make it less scary? What could they – whoever they are – do to help people in unusual places to link up with each other, to help people in unusual places get started?

**Participant:** I think the Daughters do a very good job of that. They are in such random places, and they are able to connect a whole community together, jus three or four of them. The whole community knows them, and I think that if I were to start something, I would really want support of the Daughters because that is their cup of tea, that’s what they do. They go to the most random parts of the world and make it happen.

**Facilitator:** I think they do have missions and places in [State], but I am not sure where.

**Participant:** Even just listening to this, it feels like sometimes if people go places, if there is a way for people to know how to connect. Once you connect with the town and the people, they can then say, “This is what the need is. You don’t have an idea? We have an idea for you.” I look at [Name] and think of someone who, if we could connect you with someone, you would run with it. To think that we might lose that because somebody is not making that connection, it’s disheartening a little bit. How do you just let people who are interested know who to connect with? Do you have to find a St. Vincent DePaul Society? Do you have to find the Daughters? Where do you go?

**Participant:** It’s funny that you said that because I was bored the other day, and I went on the St. Vincent DePaul Society website to see where they have chapters in [State], and they’re all on the other side of [State]. It’s like a four or five hour drive from where I will be.

**Facilitator:** So you’re making a new chapter? [Laughter].

**Participant:** Chapter president! [Laughter].
**Participant:** But I feel like that is kind of what we would do. If I was going to some random place, I would talk to the Vincentians especially that I know, and ask them, “Who do you know there?” Not necessarily a Daughter or a priest, but institutions. Like if I’m going to [Place], I know where I am going to go to get help. So if I want to start this great project or this service program or we’re going to serve in...

**Facilitator:** In [Place], a random place. [Laughter].

**Participant:** If I’m going to go to [State] and do that, if you have some larger group or institution that you know gets what you’re trying to do and gives you that backing to not show up and waving your arms and saying, “service reflection is important! Someone listen to me!” As opposed to going to people who say, “Yes, now we’re going to connect you to who we need to connect you to. You’re going to do the work, but we understand why this is important and why this needs to continue, so we are going to give you the support to make that happen.” As opposed to just saying, “I’m Vincentian and you should be too!” [Laughter]. Having the numbers to support them.

**Facilitator:** Well [Name] really hasn’t said anything. We have been talking all around you.

**Participant:** This whole time it seems like something people keep talking about is that feeling of community and feeling of relationships. If you are going to a new place, you want to be connected to a group of people who have that love of service and have that love of the Vincentian charism. “How you are going to be connected to those people?” that seems to be the problem. Where you would find them. Especially when you have people like right here. We have a hub of Vincentians here, but when they leave here, they are going to those small towns, so how do you connect these smaller places so that they can be a community united with that love of the charism? I don’t have an answer, but that seems to be the issue [Laughter].

**Facilitator:** Just sort of brainstorming.

**Participant:** Yeah, just throwing stuff out there.

**Facilitator:** If you have an answer, [Name] will pounce upon you at the end of this. Is it the service piece that would be important? Or the relationship of doing it with other Vincentian-minded people? Or is it sharing prayer? What is it particularly that would be important to keep in this thing that we are designing in our heads?

**Participant:** I am really chatty. I am sorry. I always have stuff to say. [Name] works with me, he can attest to it. [Laughter].

**Facilitator:** Every now and then I’ll ask [Name], if it doesn’t make you feel on the spot. I really don’t want to do that. [Laughter].

**Participant:** For me, it is the community prayer and really just the conversation and awareness of issues. I feel like once you’re Vincentian, any service experience you have is Vincentian for you. It doesn’t really matter how you’re doing or who you are doing it with. You are able to make that connection. For me, some of the programs that I have been involved with and have
done it for me have had that processing community to talk about wider social justice issues and re-examining it from another perspective. Praying for things that not everyone is necessarily praying about and for and having that kind of mindset. That’s just me, don’t get me wrong, having those service opportunities would be really great too, but for me it’s really the community and prayer.

**Facilitator:** Does that reflect anybody else? There’s no right or wrong answer, so you don’t have to agree with [Name] if you don’t want to.

**Participant:** I definitely agree with the community piece. Especially how we are talking about small towns. You’re already small as is, so you want to make sure that you have that family almost. They don’t all have to be Vincentian, but you are going through the same experience and during your reflection, everybody experiences the same thing differently. The community piece is valuable in that sense in that you are able to get other people’s perspectives on the same event or the same service.

**Participant:** When you had said, “what takes priority?” One of the things that I keep noticing lately, and partly because of who we work with here, from our students to our employees, we have such a diverse group of people. Our Catholic numbers are less than everyone else. It’s less than 50% of our students that are Catholic. When we talk about prayer, it has to be something that people can feel connected with in a way regardless of their affiliation or if they have no religious affiliation. I always keep going back to that piece where one of the reasons that service is so popular on our campus is that we find a way to invite people in through this service and then we do the reflection and the prayer in a way that everyone there can connect with somehow. It’s not just, “Okay, all you Catholics come around and we are going to pray in a Catholic way that will make others feel uncomfortable. And then you’re going to feel Vincentian.” It’s not like that. I keep noticing and keep hearing that that service piece is what pulls people in because it’s a kind of equalizer. But then they are able to see the faith piece come through that by how we reflect on it and pray through that.

**Facilitator:** A few other people nodding.

**Participant:** Can you re-ask the question?

**Facilitator:** I think at this point I’ve lost it. [Laughter]. Originally it was if something could be designed to keep people connected what it would look like. I think after that I asked what piece would be especially important to design into that. The service piece, the community piece, the prayer piece. I think that’s what the question was. [Laughter].

**Participant:** I feel like you can’t lose any of those pieces.

**Facilitator:** You can’t lose any of those pieces?

**Participant:** I think all three are necessary and important. Like she just said, the prayer doesn’t have to be specifically a Catholic prayer, but there has to be some sort of connection to God and to faith and to something greater than just us. The service is so key. Specifically, I have always
found that in being a Vincentian – there are people around this room – there is something that specifically speaks to them at their heart, which is the most important issue of the world or the most important thing that they are really searching to help find or to help fix. I think that’s really key, whatever you do in service make sure that it directly correlates to what you’re passionate about and where you most think you are meant to serve. Finding a group like that would be ideal.

Facilitator: An ideal.

Participant: Reflecting on it, I was thinking of a very wise Vincentian priest who once said, “If you are not, as Vincentian, seeing the face of God in the poor, then you are not seeing the face of God.” It is especially important to keep that service piece, that way those Vincentians who are doing that service will have something to reflect on and a new way to experience their own spirituality and a new way to see the face of God. I would say that the service piece would be one of the more important ones to keep.

Facilitator: There’s one more section here, which is kind of on a different note. [Laughter]. Some people make a distinction between being spiritual and not religious. I don’t know if any of you have heard people say that. [Laughter]. What does that mean to you when someone says that? What do you think they’re saying?

Participant: I have worked at a Catholic school for the last four years. I teach religion to 9th and 10th graders. What I have learned from that, most of my students who say that they are spiritual but not religious, it stems from two places that I have seen. The first is possibly a mistrust in whatever religion that they were raised in. If they didn’t have a great experience with whoever was forming them, whoever it may be, that could be a huge part of it. The second part of it is the lack of importance coming from their families. Their religion – God - isn’t number one, God is maybe number ten or eleven or twelve. They’re spiritual because it’s not something that they need to practice, but it’s just in their being. What I try to get them to see is that through a faith, whatever faith it is that you choose, you can really practice whatever it is that you are saying your spirituality is. Finding that practice that works for you. The practice is really more what makes it religious.

Facilitator: Any of your run into this on your friends or other people, spiritual but not religious.

Participant: The students we work with. A lot of the students I encounter are actually looking for the religious. They don’t know they are, but they are. All the kinds of pieces that brings them. One of the definitions that I really love of religious is what Cardinal Dolan once said, “Religion is the gratitude or obligation we feel toward the overwhelming goodness of God.” I think a lot of times when people say that they are spiritual but not religious is that they want to avoid the obligation of gratitude. As opposed to wanting to receive and feel love but not wanting to return that love in any way. I’m not knocking people who say that, but that’s why part of our job is helping them see the beauty of the religious, of what that can bring them.

Facilitator: Does that resonate with the rest of you?
**Participant:** To me, growing up religious was tradition. So we did our first communion, got baptized, all of those things – but because it was in our tradition. It was never like, “We are going to go to Church every Sunday.” We would go to Church every Sunday when we were in confirmation classes because they would take attendance, but it wasn’t coming from us. My mother always instilled with us something more. We lived our faith through our actions. I sort of understood what that meant, but when I came here I wanted to know what being religious meant. I didn’t know how to pray the rosary until right before Lourdes.

**Facilitator:** Are you Latina?

**Participant:** Yes, right before Lourdes, I would go and practice the rosary by myself so I didn’t look like I didn’t know what I was doing at Lourdes. [Laughter]. I learned my prayers in Spanish so even to this day I have some trouble saying the prayers in English. I have sort of transformed into a religious person, but I always keep in mind that to me, the way I live my faith through my actions and through the service. To me, service is very important. I feel like that’s how I live out Scripture.

**Facilitator:** This question, as you were speaking, I was thinking is a very Anglo-biased question now that I think of it. In many of the Latin American cultures, religion is what you do in the home. It’s the having the Santos, it’s that sort of thing. There’s a wonderful book by Anne Maria Diaz-Stevens – she married a guy named Stevens – about Puerto Ricans. Never went to Church, but every morning the mother said a special prayer over the children as they left, and they had shrines. It’s a different kind of religion.

**Participant:** There’s a stronger devotion to Mary. God is this almost not tangible thing, but Mary, it’s all about Mary. [Laughter]. At least in my household it was always about Mary.

**Facilitator:** Can you be both spiritual and religious?

**Participant:** I don’t think you can be religious with being spiritual, in truth.

**Facilitator:** Yeah?

**Participant:** It’s funny because I feel like we hear this a lot, the “I’m spiritual but not religious.” I always go back to that some of that sounds like, whether you’re spiritual or religious, knowing the rules or knowing the Scripture. If someone says, “I’m not religious.” Sometimes I try to figure out if you don’t want me to quiz you something, or if you are afraid that you don’t know the rosary so you’re not religious, or that you will sit in church and even if you feel really connected – that’s the spiritual part – and say, “I don’t know the prayers they’re saying so I’m not really religious.” Or, “I don’t come often enough to say that I am religious.” I don’t know; I haven’t figured that out, but whenever I put it in that way it makes more sense when someone says, “well, I am spiritual but not religious.” It sounds to me a lot of it I feel like is that they can’t answer the questions that they are supposed to know, or they are not doing the things they are supposed to do if they were religious.
**Facilitator:** Do the experiences of being a Vincentian volunteer, being in the VITAL program, or whatever, did that influence your understanding of being spiritual or religious? Does that have an impact on that? Because you were saying that it’s what you do for others that makes you religious.

**Participant:** Especially the Vincentian priests and the Daughters. They really helped form the religious part of me. It wasn’t like if I didn’t know something, “Oh, shame on you for not knowing.” It was an invitation to learn. It was like they led me through this whole process, if that makes sense.

**Facilitator:** Any of the rest of you: did VITAL or any other experience that you had have an effect on your understanding to what it means like to be religious or spiritual or both or neither?

**Participant:** When I was younger, I was always involved in Church. It was just something that we did as a family, and when I was in high school it was something that you did because that’s what you family did and we were Catholic. That’s what it was. I always say that when I came to St. John’s, and I really met the Vincentians and learned from them and understood more and more, that’s when I actually finally fell in love with God. That was my first time falling in love. When I’ve had that and I’ve had those moments in my life since then, that’s really for me where I recognize there’s actually spirit in my practice now. I don’t do it because that’s what my parents told me to do or because it’s what I’m supposed to do. I do it because I have such a strong love of God. I feel strongly called to that from God.

**Participant:** It really helped me being here and being involved in Vincentian activities. Realizing that service is a spiritual experience, and it is not necessarily a product of being spiritual. Not like, “I am a spiritual person, or I am a religious person, so therefore I serve.” Seeing Christ in the poor is part of that, seeing Christ in those we serve is such an important part of it. It’s not, “I believe in Christ therefore I serve those in need.” But it’s, “I believe in Christ and I’m able to encounter him through those that I serve.” That’s been something that is a process to learn. There was no, “Here’s the handbook and now you know.” It’s something that I have come to realize and experience.

**Facilitator:** [Name], a chance if you want to say anything, but I don’t want to put you on the spot.

**Participant:** Yeah, I think my experience with being more religious here would have to attending liturgy here, which is led by our Vincentian priests. I think being self-fed by those experiences has helped me develop my Vincentian spirituality as well through that experience of religion. For me, that’s where it stems from.

**Facilitator:** How would you define Vincentian spirituality as compared to other kinds of spirituality?

**Participant:** It’s a spirituality of others, of the poor. It’s seeing the world and your faith through how you can help the poor and how you are seeing Christ in the poor, really. The poor could
mean anything. The poor doesn’t necessarily have to mean those experiencing poverty; it can be those in any sort of difficult situation.

**Facilitator:** Any other thing that you would add to define Vincentian spirituality? I’m just curious. It’s not on here, but it struck me as a nice question to ask.

**Participant:** I always felt that the Vincentians never just said, “Do things” that I could do. Sometimes in different services that I have been to, the priest will say a list of things that you have to do to be a person Catholic, a better person. Sometimes they were unrealistic in what they wanted. With the Vincentians, there are simple things that you can do to show your love for God. There’s also recognizing that there are times in which you are the one who is poor and you need someone to help and guide you. It could be in anything, maybe you are poor in attitude.

**Participant:** I don’t think you can talk about Vincentian spirituality without using the words respect and dignity. I don’t know where, but I know I learned it from the Vincentians. Somewhere along the line, I picked those words up. As soon as they stuck in my head, it’s constant. You hear it, you see it, and you feel it; they’re always there when it comes to Vincentians. It’s that idea that there’s respect and dignity of everyone involved. Either you’re working to improve it, you’re making sure that you’re showing it, whatever it is. Those are the two things that always seem to come up.

**Facilitator:** The second last question on this is what your hopes and expectations are for you relationship with the Vincentian mission and the other volunteers in the future? As you move on, what are your personal hopes and expectations for this sort of thing?

**Facilitator:** I am realizing now that [Name] already said it by hoping to get involved with something down in [Place]. We can leave her off the hook, but the rest of you...

**Participant:** I said it on the survey thing, but I would love if there were some kind of third order Vincentians. Or something like that.

**Facilitator:** Pardon?

**Participant:** I like that I do, so I am smiling.

**Facilitator:** What would it be like?

**Participant:** I don’t know. [Laughter].

**Participant:** Now you’ve asked too much [Laughter].

**Participant:** I don’t think of everything! [Laughter].

**Participant:** Like I said earlier, a way to commit yourself organizationally to the charism and in a way that is not necessarily being done now. Sometimes when you are in those bored moments, when you’re googling all sorts of things, and you’re looking at the St. Vincent DePaul society. There was one at my parish but there isn’t one anymore. Even then, there wasn’t anything like
what I have come to know what is here. That probably isn’t the right thing for me, and I had even
looked into the Ladies of Charity. I’m not really sure that’s what I’m looking for either.
[Laughter].

**Facilitator:** They’re kind of old aren’t they? [Laughter].

**Participant:** It’s that point of the groups here. What we have here, the groups that I know there’s
a little bit of that. There’s also a little bit about the work that they are doing, especially as a
younger person. I still want to get my hands dirty, in a sense, so that’s not the right group. Do I
just join something that’s available just so I can get my Vincentian on? At the same time, it
would be great if there was something more official with that support of the Vincentian family,
but at the same time something that could grow with the needs of people how like us and those
unidentified Vincentian participants.

**Facilitator:** I probably shouldn’t have said that about the Ladies of Charity, [Laughter] but in
any case, do any of the rest of you have any particular hopes or expectations for the future?

**Facilitator:** What about for your expectations for your relationship with the parish or the
Catholic Church in the future?

**Participant:** Yeah.

**Facilitator:** Yeah?

**Participant:** Because I will be leaving here, I do want to be still involved in some way. The
logical stuff is to be involved in a parish, but I don’t know what that means. I did go to church at
my home parish, but it was – again – because I had to go to confirmation classes. I have never
willfully out of my own free will ever been involved in a parish like that before. It will be
interesting to make that transition because here, the campus ministers and the older students
facilitated that community for you to be involved with the parish here. We are so lucky to have a
parish on campus, but what happens when you leave?

**Participant:** It’s difficult. I consider myself to be quite a Church-hopper in the last four years.
The parish that I went to before I came to St. John’s doesn’t really feel like home anymore.
That’s definitely a struggle of not feeling really connected to the parish. There isn’t a group of
young parishioners. I would say that in my age bracket there are maybe 15 people who go to my
Church. That’s sad and very underwhelming. I look around. I have been active and looking to
find a place where I want to go to Mass, but there hasn’t been a place where I really feel called to
join in a real parish way where I am participating in the Mass itself, getting involved in service
projects. It is difficult, and I am still looking.

**Participant:** When [Name] said before about that piece of “everything St. John’s,” and you want
to have a few things outside your work and your life. I tried to do that a little bit with the Church
piece. It feels that same way. I have gone to more churches, and I still haven’t found one in a
long time. I feel most at home when we have some type of celebration on campus. That’s a huge
piece of my work life, knowing that if something difficult happens, we gather together in prayer
at work, just knowing that that’s a part of work or when we are celebrating certain things. The Christmas Mass is one of those things that I really look forward to here, more so here than I do even at my home parish. Just being able to find that outside of here is difficult, so knowing that that’s a part of work that helps me stay connected.

Facilitator: And you two are sort of stuck here for now? [Laughter]. But in the future, what would you hope? If you don’t do this job for the rest of your life, how do you hope to stay connected with Church and parish?

Participant: Well, my life is the Church, so they don’t really have a lot of need for a liturgist in a city group, so I am going to work for the Church in one way or another. I have a home parish in which I am very involved in. I see my involvement in it, my husband and I are sort of sneaky about it, but we are we are suddenly in all these communities. [Laughs]. We see that as one of our responsibilities, looking around and seeing very few people in our age brackets saying, “This is going to be us.” When you look at the parish council, which we are not on. In ten or fifteen years, that’s going to be us. We are going to be the ones who are still around. I feel very fortunate that I have this – it is also the parish that I grew up with. I am very fortunate that I have this connection, but I don’t know if I am the best person to answer this question.

Participant: Same, but I think what the parish can provide is that sense of community. Like what [Name] was saying when something tragic happens, and you need to gather for prayer, you are going to go to your community, your parish. Just kind of realizing that as much as you need the community during the community, the community also needs you. Just to bring yourself and your gifts and talents to people who need you. That’s what I hope for.

Facilitator: Is there anything that a parish can do to make things better? That’s not on the list, but I am just curious. [Laughter].

Participant: That’s a whole other focus group. [Laughter].

Facilitator: We won’t do that. There is one more question that says, “Have you or has someone that you know well from your volunteer experiences ever thought of entering the priesthood or the religious life?” Do you know of anyone who after they were a volunteer decided to do so?

Participant: [Multiple participants whisper “Tom Kane”].

Facilitator: Tom Kane?

Participant: Yeah. [Laughter].

Participant: One of our friends who went here and is a recent grad did his bachelor’s and master’s here is just signed away to enter the Vincentians, so that’s exciting. That just happened recently, so that’s the first person that comes to mind.

Facilitator: In your own experience does being a volunteer influence the number of people that that at least crosses their mind, even if they don’t.
Participant: Yeah, definitely. Especially through the personal relationships with Vincentians and Daughters. We have a number of Vincentians here and we have a Daughter who this year has joined our staff in Campus Ministry, she’s phenomenal. One thing I always reflect on about her is that she is a joyful person and energetic person. She’s one of those just beautiful examples that people can look to her and say, “I want this for my life. I want to be as happy as she is. I can still be a teacher and work, have this kind of job, she’s a campus minister, so I could do that.” Those personal witnesses make religious life just so much more accessible and not this kind of separate thing. Like, I need to give my…

Facilitator: Yeah, like pray 24 hours a day. [Laughter].

Participant: Exactly. I think also through those programs that sow the seeds and then it’s really those personal witnesses of those Vincentians and Daughters.

Facilitator: That’s something [Name] said at the very beginning, getting to know people as real people.

Participant: Yeah, definitely.

Participant: I agree.

Facilitator: Well the very very last question, which isn’t on here, but this is the one you’re always supposed to end with is, “are there any questions we didn’t talk about that we should have talked about?” Anything that you wanted to say that you didn’t have a chance to say. About any Vincentian volunteer programs and the alumni thereof.

Participant: The VLM is trying to foster that idea of providing a program for people who just graduated college and are searching for that.

Facilitator: And they’re doing this right now you said?

Participant: Yeah, the VLM is for anyone 21 through 35, so it’s this whole group of people that aren’t in college anymore. They don’t have the accessibility for service per se. Then afterwards, it’s, “how you stay connected to the program?” They’re trying to do that, but how do we make that on a grander scale?

Facilitator: Do you have any ideas? [Laughter]. I would love to hear them. Anything else?

Participant: This sounds so cheesy, but the Vincentians are totally having a moment with Pope Francis. What I mean by that, is while he is Jesuit, I feel like everything he is saying is so Vincentian. What an opportunity to open the charism in a wider way to invite people into it. In a way that’s saying, “You’re Vincentian and you don’t know it, so let us help you understand why.” I hope for that, I hope for more opportunities beyond just having attended a Vincentian institution for people to encounter that. We are all very lucky that we have so blessed that we went to St. John’s and connected to the charism that way, but I wouldn’t have if I hadn’t gone to St. John’s. Whereas something like the Franciscans might have very well encountered. I don’t know if that makes sense, but I hope for that. Of course, not in our circles, that’s our life all the
time. Meaning the St. John’s people who really came to know and love the story of Vincent and Louise. I hope for that. I hope whatever comes of that is just inviting more people on a larger scale to being Vincentian.

**Facilitator:** Well, it’s 7 o’clock. I want to say thank you to everybody for doing this.

**Participants:** Thank you.
Facilitator: So the first thing is—how has your volunteer experience affected you, changed you in any way? However that might be. Maybe it didn’t change you at all. Lessons that you learned from it.

Participant: That’s such a huge question.

Participant: I think it’s hard because a lot of us have still been involved with CVV and the Vincentian way that it’s intertwined within our lives so it’s hard to… you have to sit down and give it a lot of thought to say “oh, it’s because of CVV that I chose that path.” So, it’s difficult.

Facilitator: Well, maybe some, backing up then, this one’ll make it a little easier then. What were you doing before you, you came here? I mean how did you find out about CVV? And, you know. Decided to come here. That might be a better lead in. What attracted you, what were you doing when you said “Oh I think I’ll go and join CV?”

Participant: Well I always laugh, because I was working at a hospital and I was a new grad and I’ve never made as much money as here. And I was working there, and I haven’t gone back, so I mean… it’s been a very valuable experience for me… but, it felt like a life’s purpose, I guess.

Facilitator: Or for that matter, if going to Kenya changed you, you can say that too.

Participant: I graduated college and wanted to be a social worker but I just felt like there was so much more in the world to learn and experience. Like, and like, go outside my comfort zone—which is why I did my year in [Place], I realized the world is even bigger than I thought. So much to experience and learn, and… the world is so much different from like how I was, grew up? And so we’re, I dunno—we were just like intention… to keep learning and just like, keeping exposed to different people.

Participant: I came CVV right after college, right after I finished my undergrad in nursing, and, I was trying to decide right after college whether I wanted to start working at a hospital or move on to a program. I’m also a nurse. And, um, I was looking to live in another part of the country and live in a new city but also to live in an intentional community and have a spiritual focus. Like, being a nursing major I had friends in undergrad who had more of a ministry or spiritual focus major. Like, religious studies, and they got to do that all the time and they go to this all the time with their studies. With nursing I was really focused on my career path. I was glad to have a year devoted to like that kind of that intentional spirituality and community that I guess I didn’t get enough of in college. Then after CVV I did work at a hospital for another four and a half years, um, but with a population very similar to the population I served with CVV. Like women
come in, homeless persons. And now I’m doing home & health nursing, also with a very similar population. So. Something I take away from my CVV experience, is like, I think I came into CVV very idealistic and wanting to make a huge impact and change and that’s very, I think common to a lot of volunteers, or maybe I’m speaking for people.

Participant: I came out of CVV actually feeling like I had less impact, and less influence, than I had anticipated going in—but ever since CVV, like, walking with this population has been part of my path, regardless, so I think that’s what I take away from it a key thing is like—no matter how frustrated or difficult it can be, as it was for me at work today, like walking with this population, and these people that, you know, our service is about, rather than just kind of leaving them for something different.

Facilitator: Anybody else? What you were hoping for you when you went into the program, and whether it’s changed now in any way?

Participant: I also studied social work, in college, and came right to CVV from that track, and I think probably the biggest shift—I always knew I was gonna be in a service oriented field, but maybe that the big shift is that like I wasn’t, always the helper. Like, I too was benefitting, so to put a name on that there was a reciprocal relationality that was never talked about in Social Work. Like you don’t have relationship you have boundaries, and you have all these things, and it starts to get really muddy when you start – mucking around. And to really spend a lot of time thinking about that and praying about that, and bringing some of those things to life. About how hard it is to maintain those boundaries and like, why those separations exist and things like that. I think that really rocked the perspective I came in with… in, in knowing how to serve the poor. Yeah.

Facilitator: Did anybody else, did it change your relationships like that?

Participant: Yeah. Well, I as—my background, is, I did CVV when I was 29, and I was 30 while I was doing it. And I came from a business background, and so, was in a fast paced, big money job and, just, got burned out, and uh, was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. And I think CVV allowed me to pursue, I think, what I was always called to do and what was always in my heart. But I kind of, like, I was denying that, for a long time, and so—so it definitely, many memories and, that’s why it’s so huge. And so, it was, your question as far as relationships, yeah. I wouldn’t have relationships with people that [Name] was talking about, and the people are at the margins you know, that are on the margins, and I wouldn’t have those relationships, like I do today and be open to that. So, uh. Yeah.

Facilitator: Yeah, so it’s, changed your relationships, or—prayer life or—any of that sort of thing?
Participant: It’s almost hard, to see where CVV hasn’t necessarily affected some facet of life. Well maybe not every day but, Well I’m sure in everyday as well, um, I came from the north of [State] out of school there, I graduated. A lot of friends were in oil, so, really focused on that. You know, I think the southern way is starting a family after you graduate college. Move back home, start a family, that kind of thing. And, so, it was very hard to: one, even understand why I was necessarily doing this but I felt kind of doing this, but I felt kind of pulled towards it. But then to try and explain it to friends, was always really difficult. Because, I think your focus changes pretty quickly. Like everyone was saying your relationships, you kind of come in really idealistic, thinking you’re going to impact something really, significantly. And you wash away with kind of a realization of what your ability is. And I don’t necessarily think it’s a bad thing as much as it is realizing that that’s not a singular job. That it takes a community. I think you realize the importance of a community when you come at work like this.

Facilitator: Did any of you have, like, you thought you were going to be doing one thing with your life and then the volunteer program changed your life? Or your life choices? It’s okay if it didn’t; I’m just curious.

Participant: I think that when you work with the homeless, it’s really hard, or people who are really impoverished, too… especially if you build a real relationship. To walk away with necessarily the same goals, the same aspirations. And I don’t necessarily mean you stop trying. Your perspective changes. You realize maybe what is more important. One of the goods things I think about this—I think—about this community is we have people from 80 years old down to like 15 years old kind of involved in various capacities, and so you can hear people kind of… I think everyone likes to comment on your life or your life choices, especially when you’re a young adult doing something like this. If you listen to it, you appreciate it because people share their little nuggets of wisdom. Of the years, like—I wish I had decided to make time for something like, CVV when I was younger, and not be so focused on XY or Z.

Facilitator: And uh, you were nodding and I wasn’t sure that meant if you were thinking anything specific?

Participant: I think, almost in retrospect, I don’t know what my plan was. But now, we live in suburbia and I have four kids and I drive a minivan (laughs). I mean I feel like in a lot of ways, just like everyone else. But in some ways it’s very lonely. I go to places. I just had a friend from Church invite me to an “our bond.” It’s, health, and then, cosmetics, and I didn’t really care about her, and I’m sitting there and sitting there and thinking about “This product costs more than what the people that we’re working with in Africa make in a whole six months.” You know? So, on the outside I feel like I look the same as everyone else but it’s totally changed my heart. And so it’s hard sometimes, having to express that. And then, in this community. Like, this is home for me. Because I can share about the struggles, here. Because I know that the people here, love the people. Sometimes, to serve the poor is really hard. But I can share, share
that struggle here, where I can’t share that struggle elsewhere, because I know the people here love those people as I do.

Facilitator: Yeah. I didn’t know if, I was seeing a lot of heads nodding, and I looked in this direction and I didn’t know if one of you was gonna say something or if I had like, my back to you.

Participant: Was one of your questions about like how our CVV experiences affected our prayer life?

Facilitator: Yeah, yeah, prayer life, sure.

Participant: Yeah, that was an interesting thing for me. Like, praying for people who were on the margins was never something I really like engaged in before. It just wasn’t something that like my church really traditionally did, or like I’d never really done that. Or that was such a general part of the year. And yeah, that was really cool when it was really cold outside and we were praying for the people out on the street.

Participant: I think I’ve been connected to both [Name] and to [Name]. I think coming from college I had this really prescribed idea of what prayer was, and what Catholic prayer was particularly. And I think, probably, a great deal of the influence in my own development has come from reflection or discussion or like—theological discussion. Especially being on staff here. I have so much of that in my life right now, which is really good, because it keeps me really accountable, but it makes it really hard to go through daily life and just like… go the grocery store and make a choice about what kind of cereal I’m going to buy. Because you can analyze the heck out of it, and know all of the ramifications of all of the people that, produced it, and got it to you, and who is gonna benefit and is it organic and who is gonna be hurt by it and like really simply day to day tasks. Some of you say the same things. It’s not a prayerful exercise, but it can become one really quickly. And it’s a beautiful thing; it’s a really powerful thing. I think that, that makes me know that I am in a good place, because I am engaged. And I’m not on autopilot. I am wrestling some of that stuff, and I haven’t found the answer. If there is an answer.

Facilitator: You were saying that was true?

Participant: Yeah, like happened to me. Especially when, you know you choose all like denial, that, you know, well maybe you don’t make as much money as other people. There are more like lucrative careers, you know, and you don’t have as much money to spend on products. But then we’re like “Ooh, this product is bad for the world.” I think something, as I’m sitting here, just as part of this group, that really stands out to me as just being part of a community, like others have been saying. Having people to talk to. I think in a lot of things I’ve done after CVV I’ve really burned out, in one thing after another. Like I really burned out working at the hospital. I feel
really like, spent a lot in my current job, and I think a big, a key thing is a community. Having people to talk to that share your values and can relate to the frustrations of working with people. Like my patient today, a former drug addict, or person who used to be addicted to drugs, but then also like, the importance of self-care. I mean like having to take care of yourself, the rest and energy you need, so that you can go to serve every day or, be served every day or whatever. However you think of it, you know. And some days, I don’t take as good care of myself, like I don’t get the exercise I need or the rest I need, to do the best that I can with the people that we talk with.

**Facilitator:** What about the rest of you, is that whole community thing something that you are able to keep up with? Is that something that you’re able to be linked in with the people that you served here with or—or wherever?

**Participant:** Yeah, for me it’s always nice to be able to come back and reconnect with the people that you kind of owe your whole identity to. I mean, I did CVV almost a whole decade ago, or a decade ago. But yeah, I still do, obviously. I’m getting married, [Name]’s in my wedding, I still have people that I’m very close to. People who were part of that year and either right before or right after me. That I still know pretty well. But you know, the way it’s impacted me is that, I was kind of like [Name]. I did it in my late 20s; had a big career change. I was in construction management. Was making good money in my 20s. Decided to come here after Grad School. Making 75 dollars a month to spend on. My dad was like, scratching his head (Laughter).

**Facilitator:** A bunch of you were laughing at that.

**Participant:** But anyways, I look at it now and as an executive leader of an organization now I kind of question whether or not I’m giving these people what they need, as far as my staff and like, as far as their salary and benefits. Because I’m taking plenty of money and they’re doing fine, and they’re saying like “I need more money you know.” And so obviously I’m a little different than most of the people who just want to make better and better benefits or whatever. Same thing going into marriage. I have a different understanding of material things, a different understanding of how I consume, compared to her, and trying to figure all that out is a little bit of a challenge. So I know those challenges that I had today were because of my formation during the CVV.

**Facilitator:** Are any of you involved still in Vincentian activities of any sort? Now that you’ve left the program?

**Participant:** Come back for Monday night!

**Facilitator:** Ok, what happens on Monday night?
Participant: Oh, it’s a Mass. Yeah, it’s a Mass.

Participant: Yeah, but I think, to tie in kind of a community thing, CVV does a great job after you’ve done the year, then you’re done and you become part of the alumni community. They have Mass and dinner every Monday and it’s open to the community. And a lot of the time it’s former volunteers or people who contributed to the organization in some way, shape, or form. And so that is your way to reconnect to your year, your time, you know. You get to see volunteers now and remember what it was like a little bit. See places where you’re in the kitchen, having conversations, you’re playing games, you’re doing whatever. I think there is a strong sense of community. Even after the fact, whether it’s with your own or with others that you, I don’t know.

Facilitator: Met through the program?

Participant: Yes.

Facilitator: Is there any other way that other people, even you or even other people that you talk to, would like to more involved, I mean volunteering or on-going prayer or something? I guess of course Monday night includes that because there’s a Mass.

Participant: I have not heard of any but we have a year-old organization that plans events for alumni, for like once or twice a year.

Participant: That’s just come out in recent years. Anyone here on it? I don’t think so. So they’ll do like, like an Advent reflection and dinner and probably they do one for Lent and like. Not me personally but I know former volunteers that were close to me did like the VLM program in Africa. After they finished CVV in the next few years they did a month over the summer or something.

Participant: Yeah when I joined CVV I don’t know what else… there’s not a whole lot more Vincentian here. I mean yes there’s Sisters of Charity and there’s a few CMs around and there’s St. Vincent de Paul Society but I don’t know what else we could do.

Facilitator: What keeps people from being involved in things like the Safe and Equal Society? I mean, is it obstacles or time or just, you know, the demands? Maybe four kids might distract you a bit? Is there something that could be done to get people more involved after they leave their year of service? Or would people just not be interested in that? Obviously the Monday night thing….

Participant: I kind of wonder if, because so many of our alumni get hired on to the places where they were working, or go to school, or work in ministry. And in any of those scenarios you have a really weird schedule. And so if you’re working in a hospital and you work over night, or if you’re going to school and you have classes and a job, or if you have four kids.
That’s not to say it’s not a great program, but I think just the circumstances of where people end up after a year like this is they’re strapped for money and they’re strapped for time. And very fulfilled all the while. But those two things are big limitations, I think, on this particular population of alumni. Maybe I’m just speaking for a couple. Or myself. But.

**Participant:** I disagree with that, and I would say that like when you work in a service-oriented profession or job, that really is your service. I volunteered a little bit on the side outside of that, but when my job is working with people that are in need, that don’t really have anyone else. To help them out. And you’re already serving or working directly with low-income and homeless or formerly homeless people. I don’t know, for me personally, I need to take care of myself. At the end of the day I don’t need to go volunteer on top of that. That’s fun for me, and I go to a Vincentian organization like CVV and it replenishes me and tops me off, so I can keep working with this population rather than some other outlet to help these people.

**Facilitator:** Other than the Monday night thing, what are some ways you think that replenishment can happen?

**Participant:** Like she said, we do have certain alumni events throughout the year. Maybe once a quarter, I think.

**Facilitator:** Do any of you go to them?

**Participant:** Yeah. I’ve been to them.

**Participant:** I think it happens informally, too. You know people that still remember, even non-members keep in touch and keep up when we see each other and talk about what’s going on.

**Participant:** I think it evolves. Like [Name] was talking about, a lot of that stuff that we were exposed to during CVV are things that we continued in some way. So. I think, the Vincentian CVV’s mission evolved into our own missions. Our own kind of mission statements. Our own paths and like. I think the other thing that CVV did was that it made me realize the importance of community to continue that work. Because the works that we’re involved with are so draining because they require us to open up, be vulnerable, make relationships with people. Because I mean you go home, right? I go home to my girlfriend, who works with this guy over here, and it’s hard to talk about your day. It’s hard to engage in a very aware, or present way, because you’re seeing so much hurt and suffering. I think one of the things that, through our storming and forming, norming we’re able to do during our year is that. We did come to a place where we were able to re-charge, with each other. And not always the quickest, not always the most efficient. Sometimes we took energy away from each other. But I think we learned so much about how we recharge, you know. Individually, and as a group. You meet people from other years. You realize that they bring you a lot of that energy. It’s hard, it’s hard to keep going, right? I mean, you’ve got kids, you got engaged, you got world traveling... Things get in the
way, but somehow those things are also mellowing into it. I’ve met every one of their kids. And I’m afraid of one of their kids. (Laughter)

**Participant:** Somehow, without CVV or the influence of CVV that [relationship] would never happen. That understanding for their kids, like. Put your hands up when you see that kid running around. I see you. I respect your territory.

**Facilitator:** Are there other people in this area that you know who have done something Vincentian but weren’t in CVV? Is there anything for them? Do you know about anything?

**Participant:** No.

**Facilitator:** You probably just got back.

**Participant:** No. I think that when I think back to my year of volunteering, I think back to the people that I lived with and that relationship and not so much—the programming itself. But that program has changed so much. It has different people that run it. And it’s harder to stay connected when you don’t, live in the same place with people that I shared that experience with. I’m not Catholic, so for me to go to a Vincentian church would be really out of my realm. So I met two of the volunteers that live here, now. But, that was like one of their avenues. I guess it’s hard to stay connected if you’re not, in any way, originally connected.

**Facilitator:** And do some people stay important [in your lives]? I don’t want to put a heavy guilt trip on anyone if they feel like “I don’t care if I ever see these people again.” I do want people to have the opportunity to say something.

**Participant:** Community is one of the biggest pieces for me. When I first came to CV, I didn’t really care about community. Then I think after my year was up, I realized how valuable that was. And not even the fact that we’re living in community; just to have people that can support me. And we realized that, big time, in Africa, when we were on our own and we didn’t have people. We couldn’t talk about our day, or you know whatever, the things that are important to us and so on. But, I look at this room and I know so many of the alums, they’re doing a piece of the CVV, the service aspect. For me, when I am doing that service aspect and I’m starting to feel burned out I need to stop and say “what am I not doing right?” Oh I’m not doing all that stuff that, [Name] is doing all the time. (Laughter) So that’s me, putting other things in front of it. And so, that’s where I need community. I need community to help me to say “Hey, I need to reflect on this, I need to pray about this.”

**Facilitator:** Anybody, anybody else feel similar to that?

**Participant:** Yeah, I can definitely relate to that. I came here pretty stressed after a stressful last visit with a patient. And just being able to be around people with similar values helps dissipate it
a little bit. And like I said, it helps you to be ready to go back into the trenches and keep doing the service and keep working directly with people that need it.

**Participant:** I was thinking, too, there was a gal who came, on Monday, for Mass and dinner, from Year 5. I was talking to her a little bit, she lives in [State]. And I think one of the things I take for granted is that we have around 95 alumni in Denver that were part of CVV. So it’s a pretty, pretty large connection. And in some cases we even have former alumni who are supervising our current volunteers. And so there’s that kind of thing. In talking with this gal who came back, I was mentioning there was a handful of other people living in [State] who did CVV and she said, “Oh wow, I didn’t know that. I would really like to know who those people are.” I think Portland is one, and DC is one, and there are other places in the country where we’re beginning to have large pockets. Because we’re focused here, I think our alumni are pretty organically organized for the most part because there are a lot of informal and unintentional, as well as intentional gatherings. But I think like that happens less frequently in those other pockets and I hear a desire for that in a couple of people I’ve talked to who live outside of Denver.

**Participant:** That’s exactly how I made my first friend in Denver when I moved here too. A girl I volunteered with connected me with another girl who lives here from another year in my program and we’re closest friends now because we have that bond or that realization of sharing it with something larger than yourself. But it’s really hard to meet people and be like “Oh, I met like ten people and I didn’t make any money, for a year.” They don’t really get the value, so it’s a letdown because you’re not similar in interests.

**Participant:** And I thought I heard you asking about a St. Vincent de Paul Society organization or whatever, or where that would happen, or what that would look like. Because [we have the experience of] living with ten people and not making much money, and [we are] working downtown even though we also live in suburbia. In our group of friends, we kind of bring that Vincentian edge that otherwise I don’t think people would see in suburbia, where people don’t come downtown ever and their kids roll up the windows when they see that someone’s holding a sign and things like that. And I think that there’s a value in our presence, in our own identity, whether it’s spoken that way or not. In that lived experience, you can’t get rid of it. It’s part of you. I sometimes come into our house and think “where are we?” But I think that’s good and that’s perhaps part of our Vincentian family—if not [more direct] Vincentian participation.

**Facilitator:** But if you had to design the perfect thing to keep people connected and involved, and meet whatever needs that they have, to keep everyone interconnected, as part of the CVV experience that was growthful for you, and people weren’t tied down with other responsibilities. What would it look like, if you could just design something?

**Participant:** Well, what ties me down most are my children. But, what I would love is, you know, we talked about how like my prayers changed. I see how my prayers changed most in my
children, because there are certain family rituals that I took from my family growing up, and we do them with my kids. When I was growing up we always prayed the Our Father and then God Bless me, and then God Bless everyone we could think of. And my children do that now, too. But my children pray every night for everyone without a home, everyone who’s hungry, and everyone who’s sick, which I didn’t pray for as a child. And I know that’s partly the CVV influence. What I would like to see is formation for families. Because I love sharing that with my children. And I love that my children, every time they see someone on the street, they ask “Mommy, do we have something? They need something.” They have a heart for people in need. I love that. And so, I would love to see more of that. In my parish, we have formation for young children, in ways that… families are formed. I would love to see that within the Vincentian family. For me it’s really important to share that with our children, because this is home for me, and I want this to be home for my children too.

Facilitator: For where you are right now if you had to design something that the Vincentian family could do, to either they aren’t doing or they could do more of, you know anything else that you can think of, what would that be? What does, the Vincentian charism mean to you?

Participant: I always like the peace of bridging, linking to groups, you know, and the story of St. Vincent. You know, helping people who didn’t have anything, by tying in people that had resources. And you know, getting the two groups together instead of them being afraid of each other or scornful of each other. Show each other, show each that there are people on both sides. And we can work together to get somewhere; kind of get some of that mission piece.

Facilitator: …Any Vincentian Prayers or … any of you? You were exposed in a different way than those kids who went to these colleges like Saint Vincent or DePaul or something. I was just curious.

Participant: You know, in church I was taught about the love of God but I feel that in the Vincentian program I felt the tenderness of that love. Service in a lot of ways becomes prayer. [Service to] someone on the margins, with tenderness. I think you recognize the tenderness of God.

Participant: I agree. I don’t come from a Catholic background, so I don’t really know anything about saints or anything. I remember reading the Wikipedia page on St. Vincent DePaul before my interview. I just didn’t know. And so, for me if I had to define the Vincentian family charism that you’re talking about I don’t know if I could really do that well.

Facilitator: There’s no right or wrong answer.

Participant: I guess, for me, coming completely from an outside perspective, I just learned a lot about service. I really associate it [Vincentian charism] with a lot of service. That’s my big take away.
Participant: For my year, I like kind of fell into the old Vincentian pod and didn’t look out. I was surrounded by so many people. There were nurses who were being such great nurses and teachers and they were such great people and so genuine and made me respect and like care. I’m a social worker and I have a lot of friends that are social workers. When I meet people that aren’t that way or haven’t had that knowledge or experience, like it it’s such a different experience. It’s like [they might say], “Oh, I went to the library, the homeless people weren’t that bad.” I was, like, “Are they supposed to be bad? Are they supposed to bother you?” Who don’t have that knowledge or experience or I guess respect. Those people who are different than me, and my Vincentian years are different I guess because it was—it was really cool, I guess. It was so nice to be around people who had a genuine care for everyone and everything.

Participant: I’m on the board now, so I think I’m pretty biased. (Laughter) I have a pretty biased opinion. I think most of the people that you meet, even in really casual encounters, that you meet through CVV are just incredible people. I think everybody kind of, said exactly what I feel about relationship, genuineness, authentic, you know. There is a realization that you’re not so far removed from these people. The way that most of us grew up, we felt that they’re so far removed from us, you know, that they did these horrible, horrible things to get themselves in this position, made all these horrible choices you know. You hear all these horrible stories and then you build a relationship with these people and you become vulnerable. I think that’s what I take away. The connectedness. The connectedness despite the difference. At least the outward difference. Like [Name] is from Louisiana and we’re really good friends, you know? Seven years ago I don’t think you could’ve said that we were going to be really good friends. Seven years; it’s been a while.

Facilitator: What does “Vincentian-ness” mean to you? To the rest of you? If you had to design a long term connection with the Vincentian mission [what would it look like]?

Participant: Well, we did the mission work in Africa before [we found a Vincentian connection]. We felt called to mission and we wanted to do it with the Vincentian family, but we couldn’t find a connection to [do so]. As a family, we would have loved to do it but we never found a connection. But that was something that we really desired—to do an overseas mission within the Vincentian family.

Participant: When I was a volunteer, and had worked as a volunteer, I always tell them you’re being spoon fed. You have to go to [things in the community] every week—discussion, reflection, Mass—and you’re around people reflecting. And you tend to reflect and look at things differently. I think about the years that I’ve worked in service and those folks who don’t have it [community reflection and discussion] in their lives, they’ve really gotten hardened and pretty cynical. I think that’s a big thing they miss. So, talking about a long term program or something I think that’s it, the need to be spoon fed. Because we are short on time, and we don’t have a lot of money, but if there was a program that was powerful that could get me to pray and get me to
reflect and look at where I am now in my life, then, that would be awesome. And it would build community. Because it’s difficult. The older I get the more I realize how different I am. I don’t know, I feel like I’m an oddball. Why do I care about the guy holding the sign on the side of the street, or why do I care about what cereal I get? All those things that my normal friends don’t care about.

**Participant:** Well and I do, too. I do feel called to be the edge, to bring it to other people. But right now, coming back from Mass [I was] feeling kind of defeated and I was sharing with [Name] and he said, “You know I feel like I need to be built up before I can be the odd ball in my group and challenge people.” And, sometimes I just can’t go to another event where I’m going to feel completely alone in a room full of people. You know? I don’t know if that makes sense. But it, you know, is tough.

**Facilitator:** On a slightly different, note. You hear people making the distinction between I’m spiritual but not religious. If you’ve heard this, first of all, what does that mean to you when you hear people say it?

**Participant:** “I like to pray but I don’t like to go to church.” That’s, in a nut shell.

**Participant:** I see it as somebody who might prefer a more unstructured way of connecting with the spiritual God. An example I would pick up is around structured prayer—like going for a walk in nature. I think of that as being maybe spiritual but not religious.

**Facilitator:** Is there one or the other that resonates with any of you? That is, are you feeling closer to the spiritual or the religious? Or can one be both?

**Participant:** I would say before coming to CVV I was stronger with my religion than I was with my spirituality. I think one of the great things CVV has is that it offers the spoon-fed reflection of your experience. I think the other part of that, too, is that there is a lot of time to chew on those questions by yourself and figure out how you feel. You certainly don’t figure it out in the year [of volunteer service]. CVV is something you revisit. You’re constantly revisiting those ideas and the definitions of what that means to you.

**Participant:** I think one can be both spiritual and religious. Like, at this point in my life I’d say I identify with being spiritual but not necessarily religious. And when I think about things that could be provided for former volunteers they would be opportunities to have community that aren’t really connected to formal religion, so that people who maybe aren’t as involved in a formal religion could still have an opportunity to talk about their work and their experiences and service. Because I think it’s all part of the big picture. Maybe somebody doesn’t formally pray or go to church but are still involved in service and appreciate the values. You know I think the values of the Vincentian family are pretty universal to a lot of families around the world, not just Vincentians, and not just Catholics or Christians. People who practice their religion on other
side of the world, like Buddhists or other traditions, as an example. So just to have ways to connect and form community that are not necessarily tied to the formal Catholic or Vincentian tradition. I think would be beneficial.

**Facilitator:** Which of these resonates more with you?

**Participant:** During my CVV year I had a family friend that came out [to visit]. She’s my sister’s friend. I was talking to my sister afterward and she said that her friend said I was very religious. And I got really angry about that and said “I’m not religious!” and I had to think about that. I mean, why did I get so angry? She saw me at bar, so how would she know I’m religious? And then I really reflected on what that meant and why that was bothering me. And I guess that today, for me religion has such a bad name. And I think that’s what I attached to it. I’d rather think of myself as spiritual and having a connection to God. But now I think that’s what it comes down to for me, just how we word it. I think it’s all tied in and I think many people don’t want to be called religious, they just prefer to say that they’re spiritual. I don’t see the big difference. Even if you’re going for a walk in nature, for example, you’re being religious. You’re doing the same kind of thing. Even if you’re going for a walk, or even if you’re meditating, or whatever it is. There’s still that continuation, the repeating, the repetitiveness of the act.

**Facilitator:** Does that resonate with anyone else? Religion having a bad name and spiritual being more attractive?

**Participant:** I think it’s the opposite for me. When I came here I was discerning. I spent a lot of my 20s discerning for the priesthood. I thought I was religious. But you know, I didn’t know nearly as much about it as I do today. I mean, I’ve been blessed to work in a church now, we have Mass every day. I come to work every day in an office with 20 people. I’m blessed. Not many people get to do that. So it’s definitely been a gift in my life. And like what [Name] said about coming back here and getting fed by your community. It’s important to do that daily in my life. I learned that I needed that. I had a priest, when I went to the sacrament of reconciliation once, who told me that it doesn’t matter what you’re praying for. God is healing you, through all your tired, burdensome labor that you do with everybody all the time. God is healing you, in this chapel, whether you’re there for Mass or adoration or whatever. So to me it’s just being able to open up to that grace and have faith in that process. Having just a fraction of discipline to allow the time that’s required to do that on a daily basis. This has been huge for me. I’m just thankful God put me in a place where I can let that grow in my life, and I’m not ashamed to say that. I like my religion. I enjoy being Catholic and it’s a great gift in my life.

**Participant:** I think, honestly, the word spiritual has a more individualistic connotations associated with it, which in our culture today is a lot more appealing, and palatable than say being connected with an organized religion can be. And so I guess if you consider a term like
religious, specifically in connection with being connected to organized religion, I would agree with [Name] that it’s not always seen as attractive per se. But I think that it is important, especially in the Christian faith, to have a deep connection to organized religion and to be grounded in our Church history and to be grounded in our theology, in what we believe, as well as the—if you want to create a dichotomy—the more individual relationship with God part.

**Participant:** I would have to agree with that in the sense that culturally I feel like spirituality [is a cultural value in America]. It’s so interesting, coming back from Africa, because we are such an individualistic culture here in the United States. And so, often times, I want to distance myself in some ways from this concept of religion because of our culture. But at the same time, if I really reflect on what my values are, I don’t really want to be a person, an individual, I want to be a person of community. And I love that book *The Holy Longing*, because it talks about the purpose of being in a Church is to be in a community of people, because you get to practice love. Which for me is like the truest sense I’ve ever got for what the purpose of being in a Church is. I really get to practice love because I don’t get to choose who’s in the pew next to me. And it’s very dear to my heart. I struggle, sometimes, with the Catholic Church. But I can’t leave it at the same time, because there’s a deep love. It’s kind of like a lovers’ quarrel. Like I care too much to not struggle sometimes, but at the same time I could never leave.

**Participant:** I agree with a lot of what [Name] was saying, that was resonating with me. There are a lot of connotations to organized religion. So it’s very easy to write off organized religion, especially because of media coverage of the topic and what that looks like. And you can’t capture in a box or in a phrase or in the media even what spirituality is because it’s different for every person. I think, personally I identify as both and therein lies the problem. I don’t want to overthink things. So that becomes gray. A little bit. But you know I’m comfortable being spiritual and religious. In talking about inserting yourself into a parish community or a church community, well, you can find different communities. But most churches teach in black and white terms, and that is important because that’s our foundation and that’s what we’re coming from, that’s our tradition. Often it’s a challenge to take a grey perspective into a black and white conversation, and be heard, or feel nourished. Even if it’s just raising a question in an environment where you know the answer but you want to entertain the question. And so, there’s that good struggle, that lover’s quarrel, inside me. I can feel that too. I think both are important, I think both are necessary. It can be like so many things, you leave your service year feeling like you have more questions than you have answers. And so many people want to come out with the answers and I think that the same could be said about religion. Well, what religion do I choose to practice? Do you have more questions or do you have more answers? And often times there are more questions.

**Participant:** Yeah and for me, the spiritual component, for me, service is prayer. I know I’m a better person if I’m serving other people, as well as receiving God’s graces through my religion. I have to have both.
Participant: Yeah, I think that probably at a different stage of my life, God was about the spiritual but not religious kind of thing. But where I am, especially now, they feed each other, in my experience at least. And I can’t have one without the other.

Facilitator: For some of you, it sounded like your Vincentian experience really affected your experiences and how you see religion and spirituality and the connections between them. Is that true for all of you? A couple of folks said “Because I did the CVV experience, before I thought one way and now I think another.” Is that true for any others of you?

Participant: I think one thing CVV did for me was I saw another side of the Church. I grew up and went to the same church and, you know, coming here it was a totally different experience. Again, it was the service piece and that’s different. I didn’t see that a lot in the churches that I grew up in.

Facilitator: What are your hopes and expectations for the future? What are your expectations in the future for how you’ll be connected with a local congregation, or with the church in general? As the future unrolls, do you hope to be connected and, if so, how?

Participant: Yeah, I’m very close to the church that I currently go to. And that’s very important to me and I don’t have any intention of not being connected to a church congregation.

Participant: Same.

Participant: I’m kind of fearful, in looking at the future, in looking at getting married and having a family. Because when I grew up we had a really connected parish. You want this family formation, and we had a lot of that and it was awesome. And now I look at churches and I don’t see them being so active, in activities for the families, and catechesis, and youth programs, and social activities. Obviously I’ve lived here for a decade and I’ve been in and out of a few different churches. I even looked at my folk’s church and stuff like that. You know, there’s a huge conference here in April and they’ll do another one in August, and it’s called the Amazing Parish. They have all these people—leaders, lay leaders, clergy, sisters—and all these people are trying to answer these questions about how to get an active parish again. And you know it takes all of us, I guess, to do it. It doesn’t mean I’m not going to go to church or anything like that, but I’d like to see that in the future for our parishes.

Facilitator: Do you think you’ll have trouble finding a parish, a church home to connect with?

Participant: We don’t go to the parish that’s closest us geographically, we drive.

Participant: I mean it took a long time to find one. It’s not easy to find one [to connect with].

Participant: I think probably the strongest connection we formed, and the only reason we have a strong sense of community in our parish, is because we are part of a small church community.
We have a massive church and it’s great and it does a lot. But we’ve lived here for years now. Outside of that group of people that I see every other week, there’s a limited number of folks that I recognize that I see there. They do things well, they do liturgy well, but as far as having a sense of community—where I feel like other people share the same values, hearing the same readings, parenting all at the same times—those are really valuable relationships to me. Without those more formalized things in place, I’d feel pretty isolated, still, in a parish.

Participant: I’m not connected with a church of my choice in Denver, but I go to church with my grandparents at times. It’s their church and it’s not exactly what I would choose, but it’s the only time I get to spend time with them. And I enjoy spending time in that community, which is so important to them. It sounds kind of silly, maybe, not to engage in what I want, what I would choose. But for me, going to church by myself seems less fun than going to church with my grandparents and engaging in that relationship with them.

Facilitator: Is that a problem, going to a church by yourself?

Participant: Yes.

Participant: It sucks (Laughter).

Facilitator: What could a church do to keep it from being so bad? I mean, in the sense of—yeah, you’re right, it’s hard to go by yourself.

Participant: Well once you meet people, make connections. Like, now the church where I go there are friends there and yeah it’s, it’s not a problem at all. But if you’re going to a new church, where you’re just going by yourself, that’s when it’s not happening.

Facilitator: Sometimes people that are a part of a program like CVV or the Vincentian Volunteers or something, either before they start that or while they are in it, they begin thinking of the priesthood or religious life. For example, I suppose, ministry [in a Protestant denomination] would be a correlating program. Have you ever known anyone who was discerning for religious life, or the priesthood?

Participant: Because of, the Vincentian program

Facilitator: Yeah.

Participant: For me, it probably made me go the opposite direction (Laughter).

Facilitator: Oh?

Participant: Yeah, when I was at college, I started doing some formation process for the priesthood, and if anything it kind of made my step away from that. I’m not necessarily religious. I don’t go to church as much as I did when I was in CVV. CVV just changed my perspective on
a lot of those things—very individually. That’s one of the great things about CVV. Hopefully, it
gives you the humbleness to not speak for someone else’s experience. It’s hard to connect to a
community, especially if you’re single or not married. My partner, you know, she’s Lutheran.
There’s not, necessarily, a Catholic church that I’ve seen that has a lot of diversity. That can
always be an issue. Finding a church is really difficult because another thing CVV does is it
heightens your expectations. It heightens your expectations of what spirituality and relationship
should look like. And so you go into some of these, which I think all of us do, traditional
Catholic churches and sometimes those experiences can feel very inauthentic. And when you
feel that, I push away from that. So I think I reach out for more of these kinds of experiences,
where people are willing to be much more vulnerable.

Participant: During my CVV year, like, there were three women, including myself who were
discerning religious life and at least one guy who was discerning religious life.

Participant: During my year there was one girl, but she didn’t really share that with anyone
until afterwards I found out. I think she like, continued to immerse herself [in discernment].

Participant: I considered religious life from the time I was in high school to a little over a year
ago, on and off again. CVV for me was, it was very private for me. It was hard for me to talk
about, even with people who were part of my community or really close friends. But, CVV did
give me an opportunity to do a lot of intention around that, to do some reading. And my spiritual
director that year was a sister, so, I had the opportunity to talk to her about that and to really do
some intentional journaling. So, CVV was really supportive in that way, even though it didn’t
know it was being supportive, by just providing like a safe place to kind of think about it. And I
think there was at least one other person from my year, that was considering a religious life.

Facilitator: Did the rest of you notice whether that happened and whether the Vincentian
experience influenced people to think about this, or to decide “Oh no, that’s the last thing I’d
like!”

Participant: I mean, I had done a lot of that in my mid-20s, and I did CVV when I was 29, so it
was mostly the tail end of that. So, I don’t think it had any effect, good or bad, on me.

Facilitator: And now you’re here and you’re getting married so I guess that kind of settles it for
you (Laughter).

Participant: Oh, that certainly was part of my, story. It was more before and more after CVV
than during my CVV year, I would say. Probably didn’t do much to help, though (Laughter).

Participant: I think there were people my year who were discerning, pretty informally. I don’t
think it necessarily had anything to do with CVV. It’s not like it started when the program started
or anything. I think, though, that you get that many self-reflective people together in the same house.

**Facilitator:** That’ll do it.

**Participant:** Yeah. You can entertain the question and ask, on a silent retreat, to sit with that for a little bit. And you wonder, and read books, and go to spiritual direction, and you have plenty of time to think about it. But I don’t know that the year necessarily sparked it for folks.

**Facilitator:** If the Catholic volunteer network sets up a program for people who are doing that kind of discernment, or just discerning what they want to do next, do you have any suggestions for what should be included in this kind of program? To help people in that kind of discernment?

**Participant:** I think having someone to talk to, even over the phone, for any kind of discernment, whether it’s religious life or career, or moving to a new city, it’s just really helpful. And talking to somebody who has a lot of life experience is really helpful, also. Somebody who is really good at listening. That’s like, the best thing I can think of. Or even if there are peers that are discerning a similar path of life, that want to be connected. Like, connecting peer to peer. Because, when I was thinking about religious life for so many years, I felt very alone. And knowing that other people were on that same journey would’ve been really helpful.

**Facilitator:** The very last question not on here but which we always ask at the end of the focus group is there anything we should’ve talked about that we didn’t talk about?

**Participant:** I guess you didn’t, maybe I think this could’ve been added by anybody—but just asking if anybody from having this experience this Vincentian experience did something else afterwards, you know maybe didn’t continue working in a service oriented field or something like that.

**Facilitator:** So did, anybody as a result of working in the Vincentian experience do something different afterwards that they otherwise wouldn’t have done? Did I repeat that correctly?

**Participant:** Yeah, pretty much, just I’m kind of asking if someone went back to a more professional route, or went back to working in a business or something like that, you know.

**Participant:** I didn’t go the service route. I don’t know if I went a more professional route, but I worked in construction for six months and then traveled around Europe. So my life has kind of circled back around, I guess.

**Facilitator:** So now what do you do?

**Participant:** Oh, I work at a day shelter.
Facilitator: So there you go. Anybody else, after your experience, did do anything different that otherwise you would not have done if you hadn’t had the Vincentian experience?

Participant: I signed up for a volunteer program. [laughs] I was going to do social work.

Participant: I feel like I didn’t. I think what [Name] was getting at is, are we now doing things that are not Vincentian or not the things that we learned here. Like I never thought after I worked here that I’d have been a missionary in Africa. I never would have thought of working at shelters or working at a poor inner city school, so...

Facilitator: So you really did change [direction]. You were in business before?

Participant: Yeah.

Facilitator: It really did change your direction, then.

Participant: I think for all the people who live in Denver, it’s a lot easier to do something with a Vincentian spirit than if you go back home after your year and you get isolated from that. It’s really easy to get back into what you were doing, or go back to some things that don’t even have the Vincentian spirit.

Participant: I think that it’s a testament to the importance of community. After we did our Vincentian year, there were five of us that decided we wanted to continue doing this but we couldn’t do it by ourselves so we decided to live in community again.

Facilitator: Oh did you?

Participant: Yeah! So, at least for me, that community is really what I need to continue. To be rejuvenated, to feel like I can keep on doing it. It is discouraging, sometimes it’s so hard, and, I mean we felt that a lot when we were in Africa. It was really hard. And you know, we were with other people that were missionaries but they were a different kind of missionaries than we were and that was really hard for us.

Facilitator: How were they different?

Participant: They were evangelizing, I think, you know. And we were not, that’s not the way that we work.

Participant: Even those who weren’t evangelizing, we were there to be with the people. And that’s something I don’t feel I talked about. That I learned to be with the people that you’re serving—solidarity—and I think that was a big focus of ours going to Africa.

Participant: Had a similar experience when I did a medical service trip to Honduras a few years ago. I went on a week trip on my vacation from work with a bunch of nurses and doctors and
dentists from the U.S. and had a lot of very different approaches to being around this really impoverished community for a week. And just having respect for that culture and those people. That was a really hard experience, to see service done in a way that as not aligned with my values. That was really hard.

**Facilitator:** If something Vincentian were ever set up—to allow those kinds of one week long service opportunities; is that something people would be interested in?

**Participant:** I think yes.

**Participant:** Yeah, a lot of people want to have these experiences. One of the great things I did was, I did a program sponsored by Franciscan sisters in Central America. It was as a global awareness through experience. It was great. So I went to Guatemala for ten days and I didn’t do any volunteer work. I met people and heard people’s stories. I learned about what was going on there, and really witnessed a 30-year tragedy that had happened there. So experiences like that, where you provide people an opportunity, within the confines of their job when all they can get is a week off work. And just be in solidarity with people, learn from people, listen to people, live with people. Rather than building a house or a church or a pre-school. Those are the kinds of international experiences I’ve taken the most from. You could have it has a domestic experience as well.

**Facilitator:** Yes? I’m very conscious of the fact that it’s ten after six. And there are probably goldfish and Girl Scout cookies calling your name!