Building a Spiritual Home: Religious Engagement of Former Vincentian Volunteers

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Religious Engagement of Former Vincentian Volunteers

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Abstract:
Recent academic and popular literature has postulated a “story of diminishment” when speaking of the religious practice of young adults in the United States. The current paper looks at the impact of volunteer service on the likelihood that young adults will remain connected to organized religion through an analysis of two studies of young adults between the ages of 18 and 35 who had previously participated in volunteer programs that were sponsored by various Catholic organizations in the Vincentian tradition. The first study, conducted between February and May of 2014 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) and commissioned by DePaul University’s office of Mission and Values (OMV), was an online survey with 72 closed-ended and four open-ended questions. The second study conducted in November 2014 by CARA included a series of four follow-up focus groups that explored more deeply some of the key findings from the online survey. The findings indicate that former volunteers have higher rates of religious retention, prayer and religious participation, and report a strong influence of living in community with other volunteers, and the influence of religion in daily life. 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. Extended volunteer experiences in service and/or social change ministries organized by Catholic religious orders and other denominational organizations can have a significant and transformative impact on the continued religious affiliation and practice of those who participate in them, an impact which endures beyond the volunteers’ time of participation in them.

Keywords: volunteerism, religious affiliation, young adult spirituality
Introduction

Recent academic and popular literature has postulated a “story of diminishment” when speaking of the religious practice of young adults in the United States. According to much of this literature, diminished religious affiliation is especially prevalent among Catholics in this age group (Putnam and Campbell 2010: 136-137). Several possible explanations have been advanced for the general decline of young adult religious adherence: lengthened time between college graduation and marriage/children, a larger cultural change among their age peers that disvalues religion, and general busy-ness (Pew 2012:29-32). Additional explanations have been advanced for the decrease in religiosity among Catholic young adults: poor childhood religious socialization, a lack of engaging young adult programs in their local congregations, or even their demographic mobility to areas with fewer institutional resources (Bengtsson 2013:190; Smith and Denton 2005:207-215; Smith et al. 2014:113-122, 265; Dean 2012:136, 203; Kosmin and Keysar 2006:187)

Some writers have questioned this narrative of declining religiosity (Gray 2011). Nevertheless, Church officials and congregants continue to worry about its implications for the future functioning of their denomination and its institutions. (Rymarz 2009) This paper will explore one possible avenue for preventing or even reversing the disengagement of young adults from religious affiliation and practice: spending one or more years in religious-sponsored intentional communities of prayer and service. We will also list some of the barriers that might prevent the alumni of volunteer programs from maintaining their religious connection once their year of service is completed.

Theory/Literature Background

Generational Change in Religious Practice

Numerous studies document the decrease in religious affiliation and participation among young adults (e.g. Smith and Snell 2009:88-89). One-third of Americans who came of age in the early 2000s claim no religious affiliation at all, the highest percentage ever recorded (Putnam and Campbell 2010:127, Pew Research Center 2012:9). The young adults who do continue to claim a religious affiliation are less likely to attend church services than youth in previous decades. Several surveys have shown that young adults view religion as being too concerned
with money and power, too judgmental, too hypocritical, and overly focused on rules and politics (Putnam and

The generational decline in religiosity seems to be especially pronounced in the American Catholic Church. By one estimation, 60% of non-Hispanic Catholics in the United States no longer practice their faith: half because they have left the Church entirely and half because they retain only a nominal, peripheral affiliation to it (Putnam and Campbell 2010:140-141). The percentage of new “religious nones” who used to be Catholic (43%) is almost twice as high as would be expected from the denomination’s 23% proportion of the population; the 33% of new Protestants who used to be Catholic is also higher than expected (Kosmin and Keysar 2006:61). Fewer than half of Catholic parents with adult children say that their children have remained Catholic; barely a quarter of Catholic grandparents can say this about their grandchildren (Bengtson: 2013:58, 103, Smith and Snell 2009:91, 92, 98). In 1970, by contrast, the rate of intergenerational transmission for Catholics was 73%. Bengtson states that this is by far the greatest decrease in the transmission rate for any Christian denomination. Young adult Catholics also show steep declines since 1970 in the percentage attending religious services, in the percentage saying that religion is important in their daily life, and in their expectation that they will marry a Catholic and become religiously observant in the future (Smith and Snell 2009:97, 114, 116, 140; D’Antonio, Dillon, and Gautier 2013:109). As one indicator, pre-Vatican II Catholics are more than twice as likely as younger Catholics to attend Mass weekly (D’Antonio, Dillon and Gautier 2013:110). The number of church-sanctioned marriages and baptisms has also declined dramatically, as has the percentage of young adults who are registered in a parish (D’Antonio, Dillon, and Gautier 2013:108-110; “Declining Proportion” 2013).

For Smith, “[t]he story of most previous research on young Catholics, in short, is largely one of decline and loss.” (Smith et al, 2014: 3). Not only are young American Catholics more likely to exit the Church, those who remain are only peripherally attached to it:

- They are less well-educated and knowledgeable about their Catholic faith, reporting that they do not understand it well enough to explain it to any children they might have;
• They are more individualistic in their approach to religious authority and beliefs, preferring their own personal subjective experiences and sensibilities to official Church teachings as the arbiters of truth and value;

• They are more voluntaristic in their views of church affiliation, viewing the Catholic Church as only one denomination among many in a larger religious system of voluntary participation;

• They may still largely adhere to a general Catholic identity, yet retain the right to define that identity as they wish;

• They are less likely to place their Catholic identity at the center of their personal identity structures, but rather view it as one among many other competing identities;

• They are unable to articulate a coherent account of what it means to be Catholic. (Smith et al, 2014: 3)

It should be no surprise that many who study these trends see in them a steady process of decline. The narrative of decline and loss tends to be framed around two primary concerns: that there is nothing that differentiates young Catholic adults from their non-Catholic peers; and that there is a general erosion of foundational beliefs and practices. As White observed, “Catholic emerging adults over the past four decades are almost indistinguishable in beliefs, practices, and attitudes from their non-Catholic peers. During this same time period, the study found, Catholic emerging adults have exhibited a more dramatic decline in attendance at worship services than their non-Catholic peers.” (White 2014)

The declining attachment of women in the Catholic Church is another aspect to the narrative of decline. In Western societies like Europe and the United States, women are generally considered more religious than men. They are thought to be more likely to join churches and to participate in worship services, to be more orthodox in their beliefs and more devout in their daily religious practices, to say that they experienced the presence of God in their lives, and to read scripture. This is no longer true, however, for Catholic young adult women. Unlike earlier generations, by the mid-1990s Catholic women of Generation X equaled their male counterparts in Mass attendance. According to some polls Millennial Catholic women are now even slightly less likely than Millennial Catholic males
to attend Mass and find it meaningful, to agree with Church teachings, or to say it is important for their children to be raised in the faith (Wittberg 2012:13-16 D’Antonio, Dillon and Gautier 2013:147-148). This decline in religious interest and practice is also reflected in the number of Catholic young adult women interested in entering religious orders or other varieties of Church service. In previous centuries, at least twice as many women as men used to enter church service as members of religious orders. This held true from the fourth-century Middle East, to twelfth-and thirteenth-century Europe, to seventeenth-century France, and to nineteenth-century North America (Wittberg 1994:31040). It is now no longer the case; today, more men than women are likely to enter church service in Catholicism (Bendyna and Gautier 2009:9-10).

Like many other religious traditions in the United States, therefore, Catholicism is a “faith in flux” wherein Americans tend to change religious affiliation early and often. Forty-four percent of the U.S. adult population does not currently belong to their childhood faith (Pew Research Center 2009 ). While the percent of Americans who were raised Catholic and later leave the faith (32%) is considerably lower than those who were raised Presbyterian (59%), Anglican / Episcopalian (56%), or Methodist (54%), it is still a very sizeable group of people who leave their childhood religious tradition (Gray 2010).

Another important feature of American Catholicism today is the ethnic and demographic changes that have occurred in recent decades. Although 16 million to 20 million Americans who were born Catholic no longer identify as such, the Catholic population continues to remain around 25 percent of the total population, due in part to the sizable immigration of Catholics from Latin America, Africa, and Asia (D’Antonio, Dillon and Gautier 2013:3). As these trends continue, the Catholic Church of 2050 will look very different ethnically than it did in the past. Geographically, the Church has also changed. New generations of Catholics are less likely to live in the cities on the Eastern seaboard or in the Midwest that grew considerably as waves of European immigrants came to the United States:

The changing demography is intensifying the geographical redistribution of American Catholics that has been occurring over the last 50 years. At the same time that younger Catholics were abandoning the old ethnic neighborhoods in the inner cities of the Northeast in favor of the suburbs and moving off the farms and villages of the upper Midwest to follow jobs in the South and the West, many Catholic immigrants from Latin America were also seeking opportunities in the fast-growing suburbs around major cities, particularly in the South and the Southwest. This dispersed the geographical locus of Catholicism away from the Northeast, from the traditional bastions of urban Catholic concentrations in Boston, New York, Buffalo, Detroit, and
Philadelphia, to the suburbs in and around Los Angeles, Phoenix, Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, and Miami (D’Antonio et al, 2013: 158-159).

For Pre-Vatican II Catholics (born in or before 1940), ninety-six percent are Non-Hispanic white. For Millennial Catholics (born between 1979 and 1987), fifty percent are Non-Hispanic white (D’Antonio, Dillon, and Gautier 2013: 33). Pre-Vatican II Catholics, on average, were largely shaped by their experiences as second or third generation white European immigrants living in major urban areas on the East Coast or Midwest. Mass was in Latin, responses were in Latin, and “the congregation watched, kneeling and standing as appropriate” (D’Antonio, Dillon and Gautier 2013:13). The different cultural and generational experiences of Millennial Catholics have resulted in differences with regard to Catholic practices and identity, such as marriage, Mass attendance, knowledge of and belief in the Eucharist, participation in parish life, and religious practice beyond the parish (D’Antonio, Dillon and Gautier 2013:107-122).

Volunteering and Its Impacts

It would be easy, and mistaken, to frame the narrative of religious decline as part of the larger narrative of decline with regard to civic engagement that Robert Putnam describes in Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (2000). Judging from the works of Smith and of Putnam, it would be easy to conclude that Millennial Catholics are not only less religious, they are also less connected to community and less likely to be civically engaged. Contrary to this narrative of decline, however, the phenomenon of volunteerism indicates that a sizeable population of Millennials are socially and civically engaged. How has their experience of volunteering affected the willingness of Millennial Catholics to remain connected with their religion and their Church?

In general terms, volunteerism refers to the tradition of voluntary action in response to a recognized need that is done out of one’s own initiative, without the intention of financial profit, that can result in heightened levels of religious and/or spiritual development (Abercrombie 2006). A number of factors increase the likelihood of volunteering, including diversity in friendship, higher education levels, greater intensity of religious belief, more informal social networking, and more formal group involvement (Forbes and Zampelli 2014: 248).

Although numerous studies examine the motivations which impel people to volunteer, there is surprisingly little research done on the effect of extended volunteer experiences on the post-volunteer lives of those who participate in them. A number of studies have focused on the impact of volunteer service on post-volunteer civic
engagement (Finlay, Flanagan, and Wray-Lake 2011; Frumkin, et al. 2009; Frumkin and Jastrzab 2010:77-103), public service employment (Frumkin and Jastrzab 2010:126-135), and personal growth (Frumkin and Jastrzab 2010:108-111). While the connections between volunteerism and civic engagement have been examined, however, the connection of volunteerism and engagement with religious institutions has not received as much attention.

Research focusing on the conceptual category of civic engagement as a desired goal of volunteerism appears to have overlooked religious institutions that can initiate, enhance, express, or operationalize the positive behaviors of civic engagement, which include community participation, civic organizational involvement, local and national voting, civic consciousness, and perceptions of civic knowledge (Finlay et al. 2011; Frumkin, et al. 2009; Frumkin and Jastrzab 2010). The few existing studies of religious voluntarism largely examine its organizational impacts: on ecumenical relations, for example, or on the construction of a denominational identity (Brackney 1997:94, 100), rather than on fostering individual volunteers’ attachment to and leadership in their denomination of origin.

Even fewer studies examine the impact of volunteering specifically within Catholicism. One small study found that spending a year in a Catholic volunteer program often led to a subsequent career as a religion teacher in a Catholic high school: “Among current religion teachers, 11% have served as full-time volunteers for a Catholic volunteer corps … the newer the teacher the more likely he or she was to have been a Catholic volunteer” (Cook, 2001:540). Another study found that, among young women who had recently entered a Catholic religious order, over two-thirds had participated in some sort of volunteer service program, and over half said that such programs had influenced their decision to enter their religious order (Gautier and Gray, 2015:39).

The relationships between Church and State, religious practice and civic engagement, faith and reason, have been foundational questions for Christian religious institutions for centuries. As Ernst Troeltsch carefully examined, there is no single approach to civic engagement; some traditions opt to avoid the public square altogether and others seek to transform it (Troeltsch and Adams, 1992).

When viewed from the perspective of the Vincentian Family, a network of religious institutions that view Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac as founders or patrons (McNeil, 1996), the category of "civic engagement" itself becomes problematic if it precludes, omits, or ignores engagement with religious institutions. The Vincentian mission has always inspired and encouraged civic engagement as a fundamental expression of its religious mission and identity. This can be seen in the writing of Frederic Ozanam, the founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul,
and the work of the Daughters of Charity in healthcare in the United States. Los Angeles County, for example, contracted with the Daughters of Charity to deliver public health care for the second half of the 19th century (Gunnell, 2013). In addition, the Daughters of Charity served as battlefield nurses to both sides of the civil war (McNeil, 2015). For the Vincentian Family as a whole, civic engagement and engagement with religious institutions are both expressions of a deeper desire to be in relationship, to build community, and to be of service to those in need.

The current paper, therefore, is the first to look at the impact of volunteer service on the likelihood that young adults will remain connected to organized religion. As such, it will be of interest not only to Catholics but also to members of other faiths.

Methodology

This article reports on two studies of young adults between the ages of 18 and 35 who had previously participated in volunteer programs that were sponsored by various Catholic organizations in the Vincentian tradition, and expands upon a previous national study of all Catholic volunteer programs (Saunders, Gaunt, and Coll 2013). The first study, conducted between February and May of 2014 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) and commissioned by DePaul University’s office of Mission and Values (OMV), was an online survey with 72 closed-ended and four open-ended questions. The link to this survey was distributed to a total of 1,737 men and women that OMV had identified as “having had a formative experience in the Vincentian mission either as a student or as a post-graduate volunteer at a Vincentian institution” (Wiggins and Gray, 2014: 5). A total of 351 men and women completed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 20%. The respondents were predominantly female (78%), and their median age was 28. The survey’s respondents were similar to the respondents in the previous national survey of all former volunteers (Saunders, Gaunt, and Coll 2013). Half (51%) of the respondents were single, never married, 27% were married, and 21% were single but in a committed relationship. Fewer than 1% were separated or divorced. Most (85%) had no children. Previous research has shown that young adults with these demographic characteristics are the most likely to be disconnected from formal religion (Pew 2012:21).
Most of the respondents (64%) had received a bachelor’s degree from a Catholic college or university, and a plurality (39%) had graduated from one of the three Vincentian institutions: DePaul University, St. John’s University, or Niagara University. Seventy-six percent of the respondents reported having been raised Catholic, and 69% continued to claim this affiliation at the time of the survey. The percentages in the present survey for Catholic college attendance, and for current and childhood Catholic affiliation, were similar to the proportions reported for all former volunteers in Catholic and secular volunteer programs (Saunders, Gaunt, and Coll 2013:31, 33; Finlay, Flanagan, and Wray-Lake 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percent Responding</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, never married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, in a committed relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated/Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Where Respondents Received Their Bachelor’s Degree</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage Responding</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private – Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private – other religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private – non-religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the present paper, we analyzed only the responses of the former volunteers who were currently Catholic.

After the completion of the survey, in November 2014, the Office of Mission and Values commissioned CARA to conduct a series of follow-up focus groups that would explore more deeply some of its key findings. The Office of Mission and Values contacted young adults between the ages of 18-35 who had been a post-graduate volunteer at a Vincentian institution in the past, and invited them to participate in a focus group. Four focus groups, which varied in size between five and ten participants, were conducted in March and June of 2015: two 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 first 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.

Findings

**Religious Retention**
In the larger Catholic population, approximately 63% of Catholic young adults who were raised Catholic as children retain their faith as adults. In contrast, 83% of the volunteers who had been raised as Catholics were still Catholic at the time of the survey.

### Table 4
Religious Retention among Catholic Young Adults

*Percent Responding*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young Adults Raised Catholic</th>
<th>Volunteer Respondents</th>
<th>U.S. Catholic Young Adults*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remained Catholic</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing in particular/atheist/agnostic</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Denominational Christian</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* From the 2012 General Social Survey.

**Prayer and Religious Participation**

Compared to previous surveys of all adult Catholics in the United States, the former volunteers in the present survey were more likely to pray several times a day, and less likely to pray rarely. They were also three times as likely to say that they attended religious services at least once a week.
### Table 5

**How Often Do You Pray?**

*Percent Responding*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Volunteer Respondents</th>
<th>U.S. Adult Catholics*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Several times a day</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a day</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several times a week</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than once a week</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*From the 2012 General Social Survey. This survey did not offer a “seldom” category.

### Table 6

**Frequency of Religious Service Attendance**

*Percent Responding*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Volunteer Respondents</th>
<th>U.S. Adult Catholics*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At least once a week</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or three times a month</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About once a month</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a year or less</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>0 %</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*From the 2012 General Social Survey. This survey’s categories were: (a) Every week (once a week or more), (b) At least monthly, but not weekly, (c) a few times a year, (d) rarely or never.
But the focus groups presented a slightly different picture. While the participants uniformly stated that the communal prayer experiences of their volunteer time had a profound impact on their spiritual practice, they found it hard to locate similarly profound opportunities in their post-volunteer situation:

For me, it is the community prayer and really just the conversation and awareness of issues. … 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 Focus Group

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 of commitment and trial and error, sometimes, especially after graduating … -- Chicago Focus Group B

Part of the difficulty was that the local parishes did not offer the kinds of worship experiences that the former volunteers desired. A previous study found that Catholic youth and young adults were the least likely of youth in all denominations to find their church’s worship services meaningful (Dean 2010: 163). The focus group 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 similarly deep 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 [the volunteer experience] 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 Focus Group

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 [the university] 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 Focus Group

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… I’ve never really gotten a ton of meaning or fulfilment 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 Focus Group 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.
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.

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 Focus Group 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 Focus Group A

**Community**

In addition to the frequency of prayer and attendance at religious services, another and reinforcing indication of religiosity is the extent to which one’s social circle is drawn from the same religious background or spiritual culture. Both the survey and the focus groups showed the strong influence of this factor, which confirms the findings of previous research that belonging to a community of faith that supports one’s religious practice is extremely important (Dean: 2010:72-73). The survey respondents indicated that the experience of living, working, and praying in an intentional community with like-minded people had been extremely important to them. A full 98% had kept at least some contact with the other former volunteers they had served with, and 78% wanted to receive more formalized assistance to foster these relationships in the future. A much smaller percentage, however, were actually able to participate in prayer, social activities or service activities with other former volunteers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7</th>
<th>How much do you agree with the following statements?</th>
<th>Percent Responding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am still in contact with people I have met through my experiences of the Vincentian Mission</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like my relationship with others who share the Vincentian to be more formal and ongoing.</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The focus group respondents stated that time pressures often made it difficult to participate in the gatherings that were offered. As one focus group participant put it:

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 Focus Group

Others cited the difficulty of finding suitable opportunities, especially if they had moved some distance away:

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? – New York Focus Group

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 Focus Group

The need for community influenced the expectations of the former volunteers when they searched for a “spiritual home” after their volunteer service. The participants placed great importance on feeling a sense of

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**Table 8**

*Indicate your level of involvement with the Vincentian Family in*

*Percent Responding*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Only a Little/Not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prayer, faith sharing, or</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>66.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>formation groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Organized social activities</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>66.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Volunteering for a Vincentian group</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>65.2%</td>
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<td>or organization</td>
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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?

**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 Focus Group

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 Focus Group 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 Focus Group

*The Influence of Religion in Daily Life*

Still another indication of religiosity is the extent to which religious tenets and practices influence one’s life choices. Here, too, the alumni of volunteer programs exceeded most Catholics their age. Sixty-seven percent stated that participating regularly in the sacramental life of the Church (i.e. going to Mass and Confession regularly) was “very important” in informing their life decisions, and 63% said the same about engaging in ongoing reflection. Somewhat similar figures were reported in the earlier study of all former volunteers in Catholic volunteer programs (Saunders, Gaunt, and Coll 2013:44, 45, 52-53)
The focus group participants agreed that their volunteer experiences had been a key influence in their subsequent life choices, both in the kinds of careers they entered and even in their choice of spouse:

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... 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 Focus Group B

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 Focus Group B

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. – Chicago Focus Group A.

The respondents seemed to have more success in applying their volunteer experiences to their subsequent career and marital choices than they were able to have in locating an outlet for their desires for community and prayer.

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<td>How important are each of the following in informing your life choices?</td>
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<td>Percent Responding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participating in the sacramental life of the Church</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engaging in ongoing reflection and prayer</td>
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The focus group participants agreed that their volunteer experiences had been a key influence in their subsequent life choices, both in the kinds of careers they entered and even in their choice of spouse:
Searching for a Spiritual Home

Overall, however, 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.

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 Focus Group

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 Focus Group

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 Focus Group 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 Focus Group B

During my [volunteer] 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 Focus Group
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 Focus Group

Their experiences of living, working, and praying together during their volunteer year helped them retain their ties to their religion beyond that which has been the case for other Catholics their age. At the same time, however, the former volunteers foresee a weakening of these ties in the future.

The Effect of Catholic Education

But is this a valid connection? It has been noted that a far larger percentage of these respondents had attended Catholic colleges and universities than was the case with their age peers. Might their stronger connections to Catholicism be due to their Catholic education rather than to their volunteer experiences? The survey included 66 respondents who had not been volunteers: their only connection had been as present or former students at one of the three Vincentian universities. But only 23 of these 66 respondents had graduated at the time of the survey. This was too small a sample to analyze in any depth. And none of the focus group participants were simply former students – all had also had some volunteer experience. While there was some indication that the former volunteers were more likely than these 23 former students to pray daily, to attend religious services weekly, and to say that participating in the sacramental life of the Church was important to them, the number of former students with no volunteer experience was simply too small to say this with certainty.

Conclusion

Extended volunteer experiences in service and/or social change ministries organized by Catholic religious orders and other denominational organizations has thus been shown to have a significant and transformative impact on the continued religious affiliation and practice of those who participate in them, an impact which endures beyond the volunteers’ time of participation in them. At least for a few years following the completion of their term as a volunteer, the alumni of volunteer programs are more likely to continue identifying as Catholic, to pray, and to attend religious services. They desire to keep in touch with their fellow volunteers and to experience a sense of
community in prayer with them. They even state that their volunteer experience was a key influence on their choice of career, of employment, and even of their spouse.

But these beneficial influences do not last forever. The focus group interviews showed that, if local church congregations and other religious organizations do not provide the kind of prayer, spiritual community, and service opportunities which their volunteer experiences have taught them to value, the alumni of these volunteer programs may seek them elsewhere or abandon the search altogether. If the Catholic Church – or any denomination – wishes to tap into the enthusiasm and energy generated by the alumni of its volunteer programs, it will be necessary to “build a spiritual home” for them.

References


Notes

1 “Vincentian” organizations included both universities and social service organizations founded in the spiritual tradition of St. Vincent de Paul, a 17th century French priest who established both a male society of priests (the Congregation of the Mission, or “Vincentians”) and a female religious society of sisters (the Daughters of Charity). The Universities – DePaul University, St. John’s University, and Niagara University – are all sponsored by the Vincentian priests; the social service organizations are sponsored either by the Daughters of Charity or the lay St. Vincent de Paul Society.