



September 2023

ENCOUNTER
Catholics on Mission – Everywhere

USCMA is a community of faith leaders engaged in networking, formation, and advocacy for God's mission.

A FOCUS on the Mission of Mission

With its emphasis on serving the “authentic needs” of local communities, FOCUS Missions cultivates partnerships with missionary groups and congregations around the world and collaborates with U.S. colleges and universities to send student groups to serve alongside them. By doing so, FOCUS affords students the opportunity to grow in their relationship with God and missionaries the chance to share their good work and potentially grow their networks.

FOCUS Missions is a branch within FOCUS, which was founded 25 years ago at Benedictine College with the goal of fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) to “go and make disciples of all nations.” Today, FOCUS Missions sends short-term mission trips to work with local religious orders, apostolates, and organizations in 21 countries throughout Latin America, the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and Africa, as well as India and cities in the United States.

“We are plugging into their apostolates to boost their work,” says Laura Bocinsky, senior manager of operations and international relations for FOCUS Missions. “Our greatest concern is that we can be of service to them, and their mission is an opportunity for students to share the love of Christ.”

The U.S.-based staff forms close partnerships with these missionary congregations – which they refer to as in-country hosts – partnering with them to determine the types of mission trips FOCUS Missions will offer each year. Those relationships are the crux of the group’s service. Some of the communities with which they engage include Servants of the Lord and the Virgin of Matara (Servidoras), Missionaries of Charity, Christian Life Movement, Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity (SOLT), and Missioners of Christ, as well as diocesan priests and several small non-profit organizations.

Laura has been with FOCUS for 13 years, first at Columbia University for three years as a FOCUS



Students and Father Gabriel Bakkar, CFR, meet a man in a wheelchair in Mexico City.

missionary, evangelizing on campus and connecting students to mission trips, and for the last 10 years with FOCUS Missions. Now, her primary job is maintaining relationships with partner congregations on the ground and looking to establish new ones.

Relationships are cultivated through periodic texts, calls or video chats throughout the year, as well as visits to partners on the ground. FOCUS staff members conduct a review with hosts twice a year to assess how mission trips are going, and every year, five hosts are invited to a training with FOCUS staff in Mexico.

Because every country is different, and the missionary communities serving them have different charisms, their needs are many and varied. At the heart of all mission work, though, is accompaniment of the local people. Ever present is the desire to share the Gospel.

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FOCUS Missions' spring break and summer mission trips allow young people from campuses throughout the United States to do just that, through relatively brief encounters – usually a week to 10 days – that can become life-altering experiences. The focus of the trip is determined by the needs of the local community.

“We like to serve physical as well as spiritual needs,” says Laura, noting that they tend to send student groups to the same communities year after year, to maintain and strengthen those relationships.

“Whether it’s building or evangelization, we always want to make sure we’re interacting with the people we’re serving and sharing the love of Christ with them while we’re there.”

Ryan Noll, FOCUS Missions' manager of operations, was, like Laura, once a campus missionary, at NYU and Wayne State. Now, he oversees colleagues who are coaching 10 to 15 student mission trips each year and is responsible for about 30 to 45 trips annually.

“It’s good stuff,” he says with a laugh, noting that he has been on 13 mission trips. Laura has been on at least 10.

Ryan works Stateside with missionaries who serve on the college campuses, in coordination with their offices of campus ministry, to meet students and encourage them to sign up for the trips. Typically, about 15 students go on each trip, accompanied by four campus missionaries and a chaplain.

“What FOCUS Missions does really well, we know how to encounter people. We know how to work with young people particularly, and we’re excited to bring that to whoever desires to work with us, if it’s a good fit,” says Ryan. “Our hope is that not only are we transforming the lives of young people by giving them perspective and the opportunity to serve the poor, but it can be a shot in the arm for what our hosts are already doing.”

Visit www.focus.com for more information about FOCUS, and www.focus.org/missions for more information on FOCUS Missions.

Article by Julie Bourbon, ENCOUNTER Editor



Ryan Noll, in the blue polo, on a FOCUS Missions trip to Raiç da Serra, RJ, Brazil, in 2022. The group above is composed of FOCUS staff and students, and Brazilian young people.

Happenings

USCMA Board of Directors Meeting

September 12, 2023, at 1 pm ET.

A regularly scheduled virtual meeting of the Board of Directors to carry out the governance of the association.

Catholic Volunteer Network

National Conference 2023:

Revolutionizing Community

October 26-28, 2023, in Washington, DC. Details at:

<https://catholicvolunteernetwork.org/conference2023/>

Go Forth...
A SERVICE OF U.S. CATHOLIC MISSION ASSOCIATION

Our commentaries and podcast continue to grow. Mission Cafe has evolved into something new:

Go Forth... Gatherings

Thursdays 1pm-2pm ET

October 5, November 2 and December 7

You are warmly invited to a monthly conversation about amplifying our baptismal call to mission. All involved in God’s mission will benefit by sharing prayer, stories about what works and what doesn’t, challenges, best practices, emerging strategies, and surprising opportunities. Register at <https://bit.ly/GoForth-Gathering>

Leading in Mission in a Culturally Diverse World

I remember feeling a distinct lack of trust almost immediately.

Walking on to the campus of the Superior Institute of Theology at Ndesha, a regional seminary in the Democratic Republic of Congo, students seemed to avoid looking at me in the eyes. My Euro-American cultural upbringing drew from Greek philosophy and had, of course, formed me to believe the eye is “the window on the soul”: to look someone directly in the eye is to allow them to see inside yourself—to let them ascertain your sincerity. But as I engaged in conversation with students on Ndesha’s campus, almost none seemed willing to look me in the eye. “What were they hiding?” I wondered.

After some time spent silently reflecting on this, I sought out my next-door neighbor, Rev. Mukuna Tshitebua. Pastor Mukuna had spent 10 years in France and was becoming a valued “cultural bridge person” for me, helping me to understand cultural practices that seemed so different from the way I was raised. Pastor Mukuna smiled when I unpacked

my observation to him. “By not looking you directly in the eye, your students are communicating respect for your position as their teacher. To look you in the eye would be to place themselves at your level or even to communicate superiority.” It surprised me that so much could be expressed with a mere glance. In that more stratified cultural framework, respecting one’s elders took on a variety of expressions in addition to avoiding direct eye contact. I soon began to notice how others paused several seconds after an elder spoke before they responded and how they always refrained from contradicting the elder. They would take their time to restate the elder’s spoken points and only then would add a point or two of their own.

Over time, I was able to learn to shift my own behavior to avoid looking directly into the eyes of the seminary’s rector and dean (my bosses) to express respect in a culturally appropriate way. I

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Mark Your Calendar for Mission Consult

Developed by our programming committee, Mission Consult is a time for missionaries and leaders in mission to come together and consult with each other about issues facing mission today.

World Youth Day Recap

Thursday, September 21 at 2 pm ET

This month, we will gather a panel of young adults who attended World Youth Day to hear about its impact on them, personally, and on their sense of mission. Please register at <https://bit.ly/MissionConsult-WYD>

FUTURE DATES:

Thursday, October 26 at 2 pm ET

Thursday, November 16 at 2 pm ET

Thursday, December 21 at 2pm ET



2023 Membership Meeting Journeying Together into a Grace Filled Future

October 31, 2023

1-3pm ET

Let’s come together as a community, be inspired to embrace our vital role in service to God’s mission, celebrate our accomplishments and sketch out the work of the association for the next year.

Please register at <https://bit.ly/USCMA-Membership>

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stopped disagreeing directly and limited myself to expressing what appreciation I could for their ideas and raising questions in a respectful way. It quickly became a spiritual discipline for me: to engage in culturally appropriate behavior even when it felt awkward. Just as beginning an exercise routine is difficult (and I often feel a bit out of shape and self-conscious on my first run), cultural frame-shifting gets easier with disciplined practice.

Perhaps you have felt this “tug” in an intercultural encounter: your intuition disagrees with something happening in the community you are visiting and your first instinct is to judge, to evaluate the situation based on your own culturally informed values and standards. In fact, what a gift it is for us to not carry the burden of judging our mission companions. If even the Son of Man did not come to judge (John 3:17), we can be certain that the Spirit does not call us to judge our mission companions, especially when we don’t know the historical background that is invisibly guiding a mission companion in their decision-making. This is not to say we cannot raise a question to better understand the situation; in fact, we show our love and commitment to our siblings in Christ when we respectfully raise a question or seek greater understanding.

The essence of engaging in God’s mission is learning to love neighbors across lines of difference. This engagement pushes us into uncharted territory, where our church language and assumptions don’t translate well to life on the street. But we have excellent models of mission leadership. Jesus took 30 years to learn the language and culture of the people before he preached his first sermon. St. Paul was a model of frame-shifting, becoming “all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.” And then he added, “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might become a partner in it” (I Corinthians 9:19-23). This partnership in the gospel was such a precious prize to St. Paul that he disciplined himself to learn how to present it in ways that made sense to the people he was speaking to, whether using his knowledge of Greek philosophy and religion at the Areopagus in Acts 17 or his mastery of the Hebrew Scriptures when speaking in the Jewish synagogues of Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, Antioch, and other cities, as was his custom.

What might happen if we rededicated ourselves to the task of learning the language and culture of the people we are called to love, whether down the street or around the world?



Hunter Farrell is the director of the World Mission Initiative at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Hunter brings 30 years of experience to the position. He has been a professor in DR Congo, coordinator of the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s mission work in East and West Africa, community organizer addressing issues of poverty and justice in Peru, and director of World Mission for the PC (USA) in Louisville. Farrell attended Pontificia Universidad Católica (doctor of anthropology), École Pratique des Hautes (post-graduate diploma), Fuller Theological Seminary (M.Div.), and the University of Texas at Austin (BA).



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