ENCOUNTER

Catholic laity on mission – everywhere

December 2019

Welcome to Encounter!

Who is impacted by mission today? Children in Jamaica overcome previous obstacles and young people in China find the hope for which their souls long. Mission work softens and shapes the hearts of missionaries – like Tim and Erin in the following stories – to look more like that of Christ. Accompany them, as they share their lives as lay missionaries who seek out the marginalized and the spiritually hungry, and then go and do likewise. They make an impact every day – and they in turn are impacted. This can be true for all of us. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will open our eyes to see Jesus in our midst this Advent, to hear His call to be missionaries to others – in our neighborhoods, across our country, or around the world.

Going Beyond Mission

Tim Shelgren had already raised three children when he embarked on life as a lay missioner in Jamaica for Franciscan Mission Service in 2017. Soft-spoken, with a style he describes as "pretty gentle and nurturing — it's not real disciplinary," he was put into a classroom of 18 third graders. The rambunctious ones.

"It was an experiment to put all the lively boys together for one year and see what we can do," Tim said by telephone from Kingston. "So they just threw me in with this class."

While his initial assignment was to assist the teacher and maintain order in the classroom, it quickly became apparent to Tim that there was another, more immediate need. At least six of the boys couldn't read at all. Once Tim realized that, he began to see their behavior in a completely different light.

"What I learned is if a child can't read, then, like an adult, they're going to be bored and not participating," he said. And just like that, instead of being a teacher's aide, Tim found himself taking a handful of students out of the classroom to give them individual, concentrated attention to develop their reading and language skills. "It's turned into a reading program, one kid at a time. And that has really worked."

Until he moved to Jamaica, Tim's life was not a mission life. At least not formally, anyway. A yoga instructor and massage therapist, Tim, now 58, sold everything he owned a few years ago and began driving a camper

around the country, settling in Arizona. The experience was enlightening in a way he could not have predicted before setting out.

"I didn't know this before I left on my adventure, but a lot of people live in campers. A lot of our American poor live that way," he said. "That was my introduction to the poor, so I took an interest in it and started studying St. Francis."

The experience set him on a different path — a mission path.

"I found myself working with the underprivileged and living on the margins, and I became fascinated with that. Between my study of St. Francis and Pope Francis, I just thought, I want to do this with others who are doing it," he said. "I wondered what's out there in the world for people like me who want to behave and live in a way like they do."

So Tim headed back East and ended up living near State College, Pennsylvania. There, he worked at a boys home with teenagers whose alternative to group housing was juvenile detention, becoming a second parent to young people who didn't have any.

It was then that Tim began to think of his undergraduate days at St. Bonaventure University, and of the friars there. He was too old to be considered for the seminary, but not too old to work as a lay missioner. And, as he likes to point out, because of the years of yoga, he can still do handstands like he could as a much younger man.

But it was more than a question of age or physical preparedness that made a missionary life a natural choice for Tim.

"To be on a two-year mission overseas sets you up to be on a rest-of-your-life mission at home."

"One of the main reasons I did this is, as a spiritual person, I wanted to figure out how to take my spiritual consciousness up a level or two or three" he said. "I stepped out of my culture, away from my country. Jesus says, 'lay down your nets and follow me.' I went into FMS with that intent, I'm going to lay down my net and follow you."

One of his sons, Troy, visited Tim in Jamaica and isn't

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at all surprised at this new path his father is on. "He had already been living alternatively for some years and was looking for a way to live his spirituality in the most literal possible sense," Troy said. "After being exposed to the deep financial dichotomy that defines Jamaica's social landscape, his awareness and convictions about social problems, values, and action have taken on new dimensions."

In other words, for Tim, there's no going back. Although his two years in Jamaica will be ending soon, and he's not sure what lies ahead — other than seeing his grandchildren more often — he knows it will be a simpler, more committed lifestyle than American culture typically encourages.

"I'm hoping to be creative and use whatever work I can create or find in an area of service, so there's no difference between my life, my work and my vocation," he said. "To be on a two-year mission overseas sets you up to be on a rest-of-your-life mission at home."

Article by Julie Bourbon,
ENCOUNTER Editor

To learn more about Franciscan Mission Service (FMS), visit their website at https://franciscanmissionservice.org/.

A Very Different Mission

By the Family Mission Company (FMC)

Erin Clark Washam was an active missionary with Family Missions Company from 2013 to 2015 in Beijing, China. She wrote this reflection about evangelizing in 2014. Erin now lives in Dallas, Texas with her husband, Gregg, and their son, Pierson.

When the Lord called me to be a missionary, I had my own set of ideas and dreams of what that might look like. I pictured the whimsical side of bringing Christ to the nations and setting sail to distant isles where I would preach to hundreds and cause conversions in the masses. But the Lord gave me a far different and more beautiful reality.

In the Chinese city where we live, we cannot openly preach to the masses. We rely on the Holy Spirit to reveal the souls in whom He has already been working or ones that are open to His promptings.

I finally recognized that Christ called me to China to serve her and help her begin this process of conversion and healing.

In the first month of our arrival I met Honey, a 27-year-old Chinese national. She was beautiful, loving, and magnetic. She immediately clung to me, attempted to teach me Mandarin until late in the night, gave gifts welcoming us to China, and showed us many pictures of her family and friends. Honey did not know the Lord. She grew up in a small village that only had Muslim mosques and was thirsting for love and truth.

I finally listened to the whisper of God begging me to direct my attention to discipling Honey. I finally recognized that Christ called me to China to serve her and help her begin this process of conversion and healing. I began setting aside time to visit Honey at work, inviting her over for meals, and asking her to join our weekly prayer meetings.

After four months, Honey came to our prayer meeting and sat in for my talk on Mary. Since I had prepared my teaching for Catholics, I had to throw out my preparations and start from scratch, introducing God the Father, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ the Son, and Mary the Mother of God. It was a nerve-racking, yet blessed meeting, and I thanked God for Honey's attendance.

The next day I stopped in to see Honey at work. She took me aside and pulled out from her purse an aged image of Mary and baby Jesus! She said that when she had felt alone or had no one to speak with, she would pull out this image and talk to this woman. Tears flooded my eyes. Our Mother had begun working on Honey prior to my arrival in China. Mary had brought us together so that I would, in turn, bring Honey to Jesus Christ, Her Son.

It has been three months since she came to that first prayer meeting and God has continued his marvelous work. Honey now attends every Tuesday meeting, shares during the time of reflection, asks clarifying questions when given a scriptural text, and has been wearing a cross necklace, earrings, and a bracelet daily.

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In Chinese culture, many do not share feelings or personal experiences even with friends, yet Honey told me that from the very first time we met, she trusted me and desired to open up about herself. (All glory be to God!) At the end of July, Honey invited me to her hometown to celebrate her son's third birthday and I revealed to her for the first time that I was a missionary. That night we stayed up until 4 a.m. talking about the faith, her struggles, and how she now finds meaning in her sufferings. It was an amazing opportunity for us both to be vulnerable and share our desire for healing

from Christ.

In *The Way*, St. Josemaria Escriva says something that characterizes the mission here in China, "Among those around you — apostolic soul — you are the stone fallen into the lake. With your word and your example you produce a first circle… and it another… and another, and another…. Wider each time. Now do you understand the greatness of your mission?"

After seven months of prayer, trials, and deep reflection, I believe that I finally do understand! The greatness has been, and always will be, spreading the Good News of Christ to the nations. But I am now content starting with just one soul at a time.

Family Missions Company (FMC) is an apostolate of lay Catholic missionaries. Committed to the Great Commission of Jesus, we proclaim the Gospel and serve the poor throughout the world. We serve under the blessing of our bishop in the Diocese of Lafayette, and at the invitation of the bishops in all areas we serve. We train and send out families and singles as full-time missionaries.

To learn more about FMC, visit their website at https://www.familymissionscompany.com/.

Mission Profile

Catholic Diocese of Livingstone
Southern Province, Zambia

The Diocese of Livingstone is seeking Mission Partnerships and is open to Short-term Mission Trips. For more on their work and current needs, click here.

USCMA Happenings

- **Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord (Christmas) |** December 25, 2019. For one holy night, angels and shepherds were missionaries sharing good news for everyone, everywhere, for all time. May this good news saturate our souls, illuminate our minds, and strengthen our hearts, so we, too, will share this good news - with GREAT JOY! - to all those we encounter and accompany. Blessed Christmas and a Happy and Holy New Year from USCMA!
- **Books for Review |** USCMA receives complimentary books about missiology, theology, and spirituality. Our featured book for December is ***Abuse and Cover-up: Refounding the Catholic Church in Trauma by Gerald A. Arbuckle.*** For this book or a current listing, email Nichole Petty, the USCMA Office Manager.

The United States Catholic Mission Association is a national alliance of individuals and organizations committed to the mission Jesus entrusted to his Church. Through its members and services USCMA animates missionaries, prepares them for mission, accompanies them through mission, and form them for leadership. ENCOUNTER is made possible in part, by a grant from Catholic Communication Campaign. You build bridges of global solidarity by supporting USCMA. Donate at uscatholicmission.org. Copyright 2019.

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