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**ENCOUNTER**  
*Catholics on Mission – Everywhere*

## Preparing for a Grace Filled Future



The spirit was very much in evidence October 28-30 in Milwaukee at Convention 2022. The theme, “A Grace Filled Future: 10 Years of Animating the Joy of the Gospel,” gave shape and purpose to USCMA’s first in-person gathering since the start of the pandemic.

Members of USCMA and other mission leaders met to discuss the new mission statement — that the “USCMA is a community of faith leaders engaged in networking, formation, and advocacy for God’s mission” — in light of Pope Francis’ 2013 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. In that document, the pope calls on the Church “to embark on a new chapter of evangelism” as a community of disciples “permanently in a state of mission.”



Keynote speaker Fr. Jim Kroeger, MM, set the tone for the three-day gathering with his talk, “Always Alert to God’s Signs.” Participants engaged in three panels — on networking, formation and advocacy — reflecting and engaging in conversation on how they were engaged in that area, what they could offer USCMA in that area, and how USCMA helps them in that area.



Kelli Nelson acted as facilitator and emcee for the convening. Her work with From Mission to Mission, a group that supports missionaries in preparation and reentry, prepared her well for it.

“My part was getting people to think differently on the topic of mission, to help connect people with the materials and the work they do, as well as their skills, talents, and interests,” she said. Her techniques included getting participants to use their “radical imagination, to ask what are the needs today, and as people of faith and hope, how are we holding the future vision of God’s work?”

Kelli spoke about engaging new communities of lay people in the work of mission and said her hope was “to get everyone to see themselves as a faith leaders. It’s character and how you’re leaning into life and mission and faith.”

She’s been working with USCMA for four years, although this was her first in-person gathering. “It was fun,” she said. “I think in the times we’re in, people are hungry for spaces to share and connect. In this group, you could really tell there’s a hunger for community.”

*Top: Lucca Kenyon, left, provided livestream coverage and Kelli Nelson, right, facilitated the convention.*

*Middle: Participants reading, reacting to and reflecting on the table reports posted after panel discussions.*

*Bottom: Fr. Jim Kroeger, left, shared his wisdom during the keynote and throughout the convention.*

*continued on page 2*



*New members were welcomed by board president Sr. Nancy Schramm, OSF, (front row, fourth from right), Bishop James Schuerman of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee (third from right) and other mission leaders.*

***continued from page 1***

Board President Sister Nancy Schramm, OSF, agreed, noting that “joy permeated the atmosphere there because we were able to come together in person.”

USCMA began a reflection process before the pandemic, Sister Nancy said, as it became clear “that membership was changing, reality was changing, and there were a lot of other people getting involved in mission that we as the Catholic world weren’t really recognizing.”

She noted that the paradigm for mission work has traditionally been people like herself, who was on mission in Brazil for 32 years, until 2010, when she entered governance for her congregation, the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

“Before it was always sisters and fathers and brothers,” she said, “but we realized, talking to dioceses, that a lot of lay people were doing mission work, people who went on short-term mission trips. People in medical fields, construction, and other fields who just wanted to do outreach.”

The recognition that anyone involved in mission is a faith leader and as such is part of the mission to bring the love of God to all people was “a profound change,” said Sister Nancy. With that in mind, the board broke the mission statement down and formed four task forces to see its work into the future: membership engagement, programs and services, finance and development, and board and governance.

“What USCMA is doing is trying to recognize what mission looks like today,” said Megan Mio, USCMA vice-president. “It’s about encountering and serving one another, finding opportunities to both give and receive that proclamation of the Gospel in our everyday lives.”

Megan, who acted as liturgist for the convening, said the future includes the reality that missionary activity has been “democratized. It’s not just those people you think of, it’s for lay folks.”

The October convention was just the first step, said Sister Nancy. The four task forces will continue their work remotely, and the board will meet again in person in March. “It’s an ongoing process, ongoing work,” she said. “As we journey through this process, through listening and dialogue, we will see how we can live out this mission statement as a community of faith leaders.”

She added, “Where it will lead us and how USCMA will change, we’re counting on the Spirit to lead.”

*For more information about the convention including links to recordings, visit [www.uscatholicmission.org/convention](http://www.uscatholicmission.org/convention)*



*Top: Board member and convention liturgist Dr. Megan Mio listening to a participant.*

*Middle: Board member and convention host Dr. Antoinette Menash shares her table’s response.*

*Bottom: Board member and panel facilitator Dr. Doshie Piper chats with a mission leader.*

*Article by Julie Bourbon,  
ENCOUNTER Editor*

## Dreaming the Future of USCMA



By Wesley Coccozello

During the last weekend in October, the members of USCMA gathered in person for the first time since 2018. So much about the world and the Church has changed since that time, most obviously because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated trends that were already in motion. Not only did the virus reaffirm how interconnected all members of God's creation are, it also further exposed the inequalities within our societies and the fragility (and perhaps obsolescence) of our institutions.

This is true within the Church, too. We've seen offertory collections shrink, diocesan structures contract, and even entire ministries close. The ongoing reality of disaffiliation, especially among young people, throws these "signs of the times" into sharper relief.

All of these signs could make us pessimistic. As missionaries, we might feel "left behind" by a world changing faster than we can, or feel that our time is up and we have nothing more to offer. But I don't believe this is true. I see these signs of the times as opportunities.

In her presidential address on the first full day of our convention, Sr. Nancy Schramm quoted the prophet Habakkuk: "I will stand at my guard post, and station myself upon the rampart. [The Lord will tell me to] write down the vision; [to] make it plain upon tablets, so that the one who reads it may run. For the vision is a witness for the appointed time, a testimony to the end; it will not disappoint. If it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late" (Habakkuk 2:2-4).

USCMA is being invited to discern and write down God's vision for the new age into which our society is emerging. We trust that God's vision will set our hearts on fire and that it will come, even if we feel a little impatient for it.

This has always been the posture of missionaries. We hear God calling from some unknown place and we go there, trusting that even if we do not know exactly where we are going, the Spirit will get us there, all while preparing us for what's ahead.

USCMA's Board of Directors has discerned a part of this new vision. We know that if USCMA is going to respond faithfully to God's call, we must transform our organization from a spectator sport into a *community of faith leaders* who are all engaged together in networking, formation, and advocacy for God's mission.

At the convention, we talked a lot about the Second Vatican Council. A key part of the Council's vision was that all the faithful "should be [invited] to that fully conscious, and active participation" in the life of the Church. "Such participation . . . is [our] right and duty by reason of [our] baptism" (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, no.14).

*continued on page 4*



*Top: Wesley Coccozello (far right) with members of the advocacy panel.*

*Middle: Sr. Nancy Jacob, SSpS, (right) visited with members during the convention before her election to the board.*

*Bottom: New board members Fr. Thomas Vellappallil, M.S., listened to participant Sharon Jewell.*

*continued from page 3*

It was in response to this vision that USCMA was inspired to start its town hall series. From August 2 to October 11, 80 mission leaders participated in five town hall gatherings to discuss the future of mission and the future of USCMA. We compiled nearly 25 pages of notes from these conversations

But the town halls weren't just about the board soliciting your feedback so that we could tinker away in a process of product development. No, they were about getting reacquainted with each other, dreaming together, and building together our preferred future for the Church and the world.

One expression of our dreaming is the synthesis document, "[The Seven Concerns of Mission Leaders](#)," which identifies the most prominent concerns that emerged from our town halls. We discussed all seven during the convention and have already begun the work of trying to address them.

The convention itself was also an expression of our dreaming. It became clear to me during the proceedings that even though the Church and the world are facing many grave and serious challenges, there is an overwhelming abundance of expertise and skill and heart within USCMA to help set things right and bring God's kingdom closer to reality.

So I walked away from the convention excited to roll my sleeves up and get to work. All of the work we did at the town hall meetings and the convention is going to be used by our Implementation Team to discern, plan, and then create USCMA's preferred future.

All USCMA members are invited to participate in one of the team's task groups: Membership Engagement, Programs and Services, or Finance and Development. Whether you've been set on fire by gatherings such as the town hall series or the October convention, or you're seeking inspiration and support within our community, please consider joining a task group.

As I've reflected on the convention since returning home, I've become more grateful for the privilege to share the joy of the Gospel wherever I am. I've found myself praying to the God of mission for the wisdom to interpret the "signs of the times" and the courage to follow God where God is leading me. This is also my prayer for USCMA and the whole Church, too.

*Wesley Cocozello is Communications and Programs Manager for the Saint Columban Mission for Justice, Peace, and Ecology, Missionary Society of St. Columban. As a USCMA board member, he also serves as the convener for the Implementation Team and for the Finance and Development Task Group.*

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***Faith leaders gathered for a picture during the convention.***



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