

# VOICES OF COMPASSION



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COVER PHOTO Peg Vámosy planting tree seeds with parish youth in Monte San Juan, El Salvador

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## No one is an island

**EVERY DAY THE REALITY** of our interconnectedness becomes more apparent. Pope Francis expresses the profound truth “that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself” (*Laudato Si'*, #66).



The recent spread of COVID-19 (coronavirus) is a stark example of our inescapable interconnectedness. The challenges we face as a global community—the coronavirus just one of them—seem to be inviting us to reexamine our relationship with the world around us and to reimagine how we apply the Golden Rule to each other and all of God's creation.

No one stands apart from the rest of humanity nor the rest of creation. **The world is an intricate web of God's creation, and humans are but one part.**

Theologian Monika Hellwig says, “We are all invited into the harmony of God's creating, which is at the same time an unfinished world filled with unfinished people.” She adds, “We are God's guests, invited to make the most of the divine hospitality and to mediate it to one another and to the rest of creation.”

In this issue of *Voices of Compassion*, we invite you into the **stories of a few “mediators of God's hospitality”**—Maryknoll lay missionaries and the individuals and communities who receive them. They embrace the spirit of *Laudato Si'* as they “go out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures” (#240). Young missionaries, a long-time board member and recent pilgrims to the U.S.-Mexico border reflect on the Spirit's stirring to contribute to a more compassionate world.

Together they reveal another profound truth: **We are agents of the creative Spirit in this world.** Now is the time to embrace that call. Let us open ourselves to the hope that comes with creating. May we accept the freedom God gives us to change. Let us risk uncertainty and trust the Spirit's tug.

May we seek the something that God wants us to do. The playground of God's creative impulses is everywhere. We simply have to accept the divine hospitality to join.

With much gratitude for the many ways you share and support our journey!

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
 Maryknoll Lay Missioners



## Praise be to you! — *Laudato si'*

BY JOANNE BLANEY

**LOVING GOD,**  
 your Spirit energizes and sustains all that exists.

We praise you for the infinite beauty and diversity that surrounds us in majestic mountains and seas, fertile land, animals, insects and the rich cultures of the human family.

Forgive us for not honoring our covenant with creation, and help us to respond to the many challenges we see:

- Thousands of people and families sleeping on the streets and under bridges in our cities.
- Fear and hopelessness in the face of unemployment, flooding, droughts.
- The pollution of our air and the mountains of garbage that clog our landfills and rivers.
- Countless migrants fleeing the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation.
- The destruction of the Amazon River and its rich indigenous cultures.
- Our consumerism and throwaway culture

We recognize that our ecological sin is destroying nature and harming the poorest people around the world. Move our hearts that we may repent and respond in loving actions!

During this Lent, strengthen our recognition that we are one human family and that whatever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters, we do unto you. Help us to commit ourselves to making changes to our lifestyles in order to bring about a more sustainable development for our planet.

May we learn from the mountains, plants, water and the wind about the interconnectedness of everything.

May your Spirit guide us in truly protecting and caring for our common home!

*“In union with all creatures, we journey through this land seeking you. May we sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope. Praise be to you!”\* Amen.*

*\*Pope Francis, encyclical Laudato Si' (#244)*

Based at the Popular Education and Human Rights Center in São Paulo, Joanne Blaney trains community leaders in violence prevention, restorative justice and popular education. She joined Maryknoll Lay Missioners in 1991 and has served in various leadership positions. She is the regional director for Brazil. See [mklm.org/tag/joanne-blaney](#) and [mklm.org/profile-joanne-t-blaney](#).

Photo: Tietê River in the interior of the state of São Paulo (Fabricio Macedo, via Pixabay).

Right: **Abby Belt** with girls in the library of the leadership development and scholarship program of Mercy Beyond Borders in Gros-Morne, Haiti.

Below: **Kylene Fremling** works as a physiotherapist assistant at LaValla School for children with disabilities in Takhmao City near Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



Sam Janson with students of his adult literacy class in Mwanza, Tanzania.

# Millennials in mission

Five Maryknollers reflect on what it is like to be a young adult lay missionary

| BY MEINRAD SCHERER-EMUNDS |

At age 24, **Abby Belt** is sometimes surprised by reactions she gets to her cross tattoo with two scriptural citations on her shoulder. As she explains, “One of them, in my mom’s handwriting, is Psalm 46:11: ‘Be still and know that I am God.’ The other one, in my high school track coach’s handwriting, is Philippians 4:13: ‘I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.’ Whenever I’m stressed out, it feels like I have two of the strongest women of faith in my life right here by my shoulder. That’s been very comforting.”

In her ministry at the Jesus Mary School in **Gros-Morne, Haiti**, several parents and even some students voiced concern about the tattoos, and whether she might even go to hell because of them.

Abby says she used these occasions to talk about the power of God’s love, and whether you can really ever do anything that will

make God stop loving you.

In her 15 months in Haiti, Abby has especially appreciated **Maryknoll’s focus on mutual accompaniment and sustainability**. “To me, that’s huge,” she says. “It became even more important when I got here and saw other organizations’ projects go belly-up when foreigners left and the funding stopped.”

Abby also notes that she would not be able to be in mission were it not for Maryknoll Lay Missioners’ **student loan repayment program**. “I cannot express enough thanks to the generous donor behind this program who has enabled me to live this life that God has called me to without having to worry about going on loan deferment.”

For **Kylene Fremling**, 27, one of the traits of her millennial generation is that “we’re really **good at handling ambiguity, transitions, and constant change**. That is a great strength in mission.” For millennials, she says, there is no single-track career or life path. “We are comfortable with exploring different paths and developing new skills.”



Kylene loves that Maryknoll Lay Missioners is flexible and supportive of missionaries working out the right ministries for themselves. In her case, she says, “I just trusted that God would handle it and things would fall into place.” And they did.

She is now in her third year serving as a physiotherapist assistant at LaValla, a school for children living with disabilities near **Phnom Penh, Cambodia**. “I fell in love with the school the first day. As soon as you get here, you just know that it is a good place.”

For a while Kylene lived on her own. With Cambodia being such a communal culture, she said that her coworkers were “horrified.” Laughing, she adds, “they think it’s crazy that I’m not married yet, not dating, or don’t have a boyfriend. Almost every day since I’ve been here, they’ve asked me, ‘When are you getting a husband? Don’t you want kids?’”

Sharing life with young adult Cambodian teachers—many of them living with disabilities—has been a good **cross-cultural learning** experience for everyone, she says. “We have a lot of interesting conversations about the differences between our two cultures. Sometimes they say, ‘OK, well, that’s because you’re a foreigner. In Cambodia, this is what we do and that would be weird.’”

Serving in **Mwanza, Tanzania**, **Sam Janson**, who is

24, thinks that being at the beginning of their careers can be an advantage for young adults in mission, and he’s been trying to convince friends back home to consider mission too. “This might be the only chance that you have to do it,” he says, “when you are right out of college and don’t have the types of commitments that you might have down the road.”

Sam works in the public health ministry of the Maryknoll-run Transfiguration Parish in Mwanza’s Mabatini neighborhood and has also recently restarted a literacy ministry there. He explains, “People my age are very focused on all the problems in this world. This is a unique opportunity to **work on some serious issues and make a real difference**.” He adds, “My hope is that having this exposure to different types of things will help me in discerning what my ultimate vocation will be.”

When 25-year old **Margarita Duran** was discerning joining Maryknoll Lay Missioners, like many of her peers, she was concerned about separation from family and friends. In **São Paulo, Brazil**, however, she has found that **building new relationships and friendships** has been the most rewarding part of being a lay missionary.

“Coming from a big, tight-knit family, I’m very family-oriented. But in your ministries here, you build

relationships with people that help you fill that void. They have become my friends and family here.”

Another potential obstacle for some millennials is the required three-and-a-half year commitment. However, for Margarita “that was exactly what I was looking for. I thought to myself, if I want to do mission in another country, I want to be integrated into the culture on a deeper level. That requires a longer period of time.”

Margarita teaches art, dance, physical education, English and religious education to immigrant, refugee and other children from low-income families living in favelas of São Paulo.

In São Paulo, “There is so much going on all the time—so many temptations and distractions.” Margarita has found that starting the day with scripture or other spiritual reading is a good antidote. That daily practice has helped her stay on course and remember why she is there.

As a Latina, she has had a great interest in Latin America, and the option of going to Brazil was very attractive. “The culture is similar to my own but also different and challenging with a different language.”

Both Margarita and Kylene

have been thinking about renewing with Maryknoll Lay Missioners for a second term, **making mission a long-term or even lifelong career**. “I find being in mission to be really fulfilling,” Kylene says, “I just want to be open to where the spirit leads.”

**Larry Parr**, who is 35, was in their shoes nine years ago and is now completing his fourth three-year contract in **Las Delicias, El Salvador**. “I’ve been here for more than 12 years,” he says, “and it’s been the best experience of my life. I’ve been able to learn so much from the people here. And I’ve been able to really find my calling and find God in the young people that I work with. I love being a Maryknoll lay missionary and being able to use my gifts to work together with the youth for something bigger than myself, to really create a more just and compassionate world.”

**Meinrad Scherer-Emunds** is **Maryknoll Lay Missioners’ director of communications**.

*All photos courtesy of lay missionaries.*

Below: **Margarita Duran** teaches **Zumba** to women and children in a favela community of São Paulo.



# When the sky is on fire

*How Maryknoll lay missionaries are addressing the global climate-change crisis*

| BY VICKI ARMOUR-HILEMAN |

*Above:*  
A fire that was likely set illegally to clear a forest in Caparaó National Park in Brazil's state of Espírito Santo. Photo by Maryknoll lay missionary Claire Stewart.

## It

was only 3 in the afternoon when the sky turned so dark that **Claire Stewart**, a Maryknoll lay missionary in São Paulo, **Brazil**, thought she had lost track of time and night had fallen. Once she realized it was only mid-afternoon, she hurried home, assuming a sky that dark must mean a massive storm was brewing.

There was a storm of sorts, but not the kind she was expecting. Deep in the Amazon, a perfect storm of environmental issues came to the attention of the world

through a series of fires in the rainforest that lasted from August through October. Smoke from the fires carried over a thousand miles from the Amazon to São Paulo, turning day into night and producing black rain.

Photos from the Amazon that reached the U.S. during those months showed a sky on fire. That burning sky is a fitting symbol for the ecological crisis of our times.

Through their vantage point of living among vulnerable communities throughout the world, **Maryknoll lay missionaries** like Claire **often have front-row seats to the environmental disasters** that

are evidence of a planet in ecological distress.

Missioners serve as witnesses to the effects of these events on people in the communities where they live, and several **lay missionaries work in ministries that accompany those who are most affected, teach environmentally sustainable practices and raise awareness in the U.S.**

Missioners in Latin America are particularly involved in a ministry of “caring for our common home,” as Pope Francis puts it in *Laudato Si'*, his encyclical on the environment.

In João Pessoa in northeastern Brazil, one of these lay

missioners is **Flávio Rocha da Silva**, who promotes a spiritual awakening around environmental issues and advocates for a concrete response to destructive business and agricultural practices that harm the environment. Through his research, which he publishes in a variety of websites, blogs, and scientific magazines, he especially brings awareness of the connection between land issues and water.

Many of his articles are collected in an e-book that was just published in Portuguese in commemoration of World Water Day on March 22.

Flávio explains that most

of the fires in the Amazon were started deliberately—part of a trend of increasing deforestation, which is one of many human practices that are contributing to climate change. One problem with deforestation, according to Flávio's research, is that “science has shown the great importance of forests for maintaining rain cycles—not only in the Amazon, but throughout the world.”

He goes on to say, “It is as simple as this: **No forest, no water.**” And he notes that water shortages are instrumental in causing mass population displacement, forcing “millions of people to migrate to big cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.”

Lay missionary **Joanne Blaney**, who works in São Paulo, concurs that the growth of the city is due in part to environmental factors. The city's ever-growing population today exceeds 12 million. As she explains, “People left the rural areas because of droughts as well as lack of jobs and other economic opportunities,” with the result that 86 percent of Brazil's population is now urban.

For most newcomers to São Paulo, however, dreams of financial success and freedom from environmental stresses turned out to be an illusion. Because the city's population has grown faster than its infrastructure, 2 million of its people live in favelas—informal, resource-poor communities that lack many basic services such as trash collection, access to clean water, and sewage management.

Ironically, **the same environmental factors that lead to drought and subsequent migration, are also creating increasingly torrential rains**, along with other changing weather patterns. In fact, on Feb 10 this year, São Paulo was hit



*Above:*  
**Joanne Blaney** (left), with Maryknoll Sister Armeline Sidoine and José Silva, an educator and community leader, in the favela of Capão Redondo, which has high levels of urban violence and environmental degradation (caused by both drought and flooding).

*Top:*  
**In the art classes she teaches to children from low-income families**, Claire reuses items from São Paulo's ubiquitous trash. She also teaches many other environmental lessons.

*Middle:*  
**A mural created by Claire's students** entirely from trash



*Above:*  
**Sami Scott holding the first eggs laid by the chickens** in a new project at the Jean Marie Vincent Agricultural Center in Gros Morne, Haiti.

*Top:*  
From left, Elena Alfaro, Sheila Girón, and Margarita Hernández divide up yellow corn harvested in the organic field of the **agricultural ministry of Monte San Juan Parish** near Cojutepeque, El Salvador.

navigating these complex issues, Joanne agrees with the conclusions of the Synod on the Amazon that was held last October in Rome. The synod's final document states that the displacement of people due to a mix of economic and environmental factors "demands a joint pastoral response in the urban slums" and "missionary teams" prepared to accompany the people who live in them.

One of the most visible environmental issues in urban centers like São Paulo is the **accumulation of trash**, which clogs gutters and storm drains, increasing the possibility of flooding during heavy rains.

Claire Stewart responds to this issue by seeing the potential for creativity and beauty in what others would consider garbage. In the art classes she teaches for children from low-income families, Claire uses recyclable items from the trash, including "toilet paper rolls, water bottles, lids, egg cartons, yogurt, recycled paper, as well as plastic and Styrofoam packaging from the market."

In addition, Claire's classes focus on "ways we can reduce our carbon footprint, the importance of plants, and ways to save the bees." Her approach seems to be a success. "Within each of the spaces I have taught," Claire reports, "I have seen a significant increase in the use of recycled items in activities with the children outside of my class."

Claire knows that her impact "is small compared to the 27,000 tons of trash that is produced by the city each day, but hopefully it is creating a sense of responsibility in how each

of us affects the planet with the choices we make."

Many of the environmental patterns in Brazil also affect other countries in Latin America.

For example, more than 3,000 miles north of São Paulo, lay missionary **Sami Scott** reports that **deforestation is also a problem for Haiti**. Historically land was cleared for sugar plantations, she explains, and hardwood trees like mahogany, oak and red cedar were later cut down for export to pay off Haiti's "debt" to France for its independence.

Today, Sami adds, "Clear-cutting is routinely practiced for agriculture, and the cut trees are used for making charcoal, the country's main cooking fuel." As a result of these practices, now just a small percentage of the original forests of Haiti are left.

As with Brazil, these practices have led to soil erosion, shifting weather patterns, including drought and flooding, and migration to urban centers in Haiti and abroad.

Sami lives about four hours north of Port-au-Prince in the small town of Gros-Morne, and she works at the nearby agricultural center in Grepin, which **models sustainable agricultural practices and good water management** for local farmers. Sami describes one of the many goals of the center as "showing people that you don't have to cut down your trees to do agriculture successfully and make money."

Using a variety of crops, including fruit trees, the center teaches farmers ways to both feed their own families and create commercial crops, without first clearing their land. The center's reforestation program plants up to 60,000 trees each year.

Haiti is not alone in sharing many of the patterns that lay missionaries witness in Brazil. In **El Salvador**, lay missionary **Peg Vámosy** is concerned that

**deforestation, chemical-dependent agriculture and the prevalence of uncollected trash** are major problems.

She explains that "not long ago, people would have used a banana leaf to wrap things. When you were done, you just threw it on the ground and it rotted away." Now that packaging uses non-biodegradable materials like plastic and worse, Styrofoam, trash accumulates in unsightly piles on land and contributes to water pollution.

Peg works to raise awareness of the need to recycle, but she believes the ultimate solution is to stop producing so much plastic and Styrofoam in the first place. She is convinced that "there is an enormous international packaging industry that has to retool itself."

Peg's ministries are part of the effort of her parish in Monte San Juan, El Salvador, to address environmental issues. Some of the initiatives Peg has led and participated in include educational sessions before Sunday Masses, reforestation campaigns, collection of empty pesticide containers, construction of recycling bins, and an effort to develop a watershed management plan for a nearby river.

In addition, Peg works with local farmers, promoting sustainable agriculture. Chemical fertilizers have been standard for most farmers, and many feared their families would go hungry if they risked trying to produce crops without them.

After seeing positive outcomes in the model field run by the parish group, however, some were convinced to try sustainable practices. They are now successfully providing for their families without chemicals that potentially pollute the ground and the water, and that can be harmful to their own health.

One of the most powerful aspects of this work for Peg is that it is true "community development—because nothing will change unless everyone is working together."

In addition, she believes, "If local people see that they can have an impact when they work together, then environmental issues can become opportunities for people to be the drivers of their own future. Once they feel empowered, they can then work together to solve all sorts of problems, not just environmental ones."

The similarity of the issues lay missionaries witness throughout Latin America indicates that the fiery skies over Brazil last year were not an isolated incident but clues to a complex social and ecological puzzle.

As Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si'* (#139), the range of these issues, from deforestation to migration and overcrowded cities, suggests that "we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis, which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature."

As lay missionaries around the world know, many of the patterns seen in Latin America are echoed in places as distant from the Amazon as Cambodia or the informal settlement of Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya.

The global nature of these issues has convinced Marj Humphrey, director of missions for Maryknoll Lay Missioners, that responding to them is an urgent priority and a moral imperative.

"As missionaries, we have felt the devastating impact of climate change and pollution on our world's most vulnerable



people," Marj says. "Though we have several lay missionaries who are involved in these issues worldwide, we continue to look for new and better ways we can respond. In conscience, we cannot do otherwise."

**Vicki Armour-Hileman is the admissions manager of Maryknoll Lay Missioners. She is the author of *Singing to the Dead (University of Georgia, 2002)*, a book about her experience as a Maryknoll lay missionary serving refugees in Thailand from 1992 to 1994.**

**All photos courtesy of lay missionaries.**

*Above:*  
**Flávio Rocha gives a presentation** on the state of the São Francisco River at the Third Meeting of Ecology and Politics in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil.

*Top:*  
**Peg Vámosy** (holding the right end of the banner) joins other Maryknollers during the People's Climate March in New York City a few years ago.



# A seat at the table

*Board member Bob Carlsen has felt the pull of the Maryknoll spirit since grade school.*

| BY PATRICK NORBERTO |



Most people would be hard pressed to call to mind anything concrete from the time when they were 8, never mind a life-altering interaction. They were too busy hiding from bullies, or that classmate they crushed on.

But Maryknoll Lay Missioners board member **Bob Carlsen** still recalls sitting in a back pew at St. Aidan's Church in Williston Park, New York, during Mission Sunday. He was listening to a Maryknoll missionary describe his ministry and work overseas.

After Mass, inspired by the priest's stories, young Bob approached him and received a copy of *Maryknoll* magazine. Fascinated by the stories in its pages, he promptly checked the box that said, "Send me more information about Maryknoll Missions."

He kept wondering about the lives of those ready to head to parts unknown and live and serve there among the people.

Unlike most youngsters, whose dreams and aspirations can change with the seasons, Bob held firm to this fascination with overseas mission. He began to see what Maryknollers have called the "Fields Afar" as a place to help those most in need.

Supported by parents who encouraged their children to volunteer, Bob never lost that drive to get involved. He wanted to make a difference in the lives of the people around the world who were portrayed in the pages of *Maryknoll* magazine. Global mission seemed to be the place where the diversity of our world meets some of its greatest needs.

After graduating from Catholic high school, Bob

went on to study at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, and eventually earned his Juris Doctor from St. John's Law School in Queens, New York.

As he pursued his career, two questions challenged him: "Where do I fit into the puzzle?" and "How can I be used?"

Early in his law career, in the early 1990s, Bob worked for Catholic Charities as a volunteer in Dallas, providing legal help for immigrants seeking asylum in Texas. Almost 30 years later, he will revisit the border when he spends a week in May volunteering with Maryknoll lay missionary Heidi Cerneka, offering legal help and, more importantly, hope to families desperate for asylum in the United States.

One of Bob's passions is languages. During what little down time he has, one can

find him with his nose in a book about any of a dozen or so indigenous or endangered languages. While hesitant to classify himself as a polyglot, Bob is advanced in Spanish and is conversant in a number of other languages, including Norwegian, Icelandic and Hindi.

And lest one thinks that this is just a passive hobby by which Bob spends his idle time, he serves on the board of the Endangered Language Fund, a nonprofit at Yale University that works to support the documentation and revitalization of the world's endangered languages.

While always fascinated with the people of our planet near and far, Bob also volunteers at the Dorothy Day Hospitality House, a shelter program in Danbury, Connecticut. This grounding in the local community helps inform the broader dialogue

on homelessness and the global role Maryknoll Lay Missioners can play in it.

After a lifetime and career of working and volunteering in communities around the world, Bob returned to Maryknoll when he participated in his first Friends Across Borders mission trip in 2010. That experience hooked him, and he has since deepened his support of and involvement with Maryknoll Lay Missioners. He has served on its board of

directors since 2015.

For Bob, the Maryknoll charism of humility in service is compelling. Whether visiting with lay missionaries in Tanzania, El Salvador or El Paso, Texas, the mission he encounters is the same: Inclusion and diversity. Meet people where they are. Respect and love them. Celebrate their culture. And acknowledge that "everyone deserves to have a seat at the table."

A family dedicated to lives of service and engagement surrounds Bob. His wife, Patricia, is a nurse practitioner whose brother is an Alexian, an order of brothers who care for the sick, the aged, the unloved, the unwanted, the poor, and the dying. Their son, Nicholas, a gradu-

ate student living in Madison, Wisconsin, also embraces the call to step outside of himself to care for those in need.

Bob proudly relates a story of a time when he and Nicholas were walking in New York City and encountered a homeless man seeking assistance. Nicholas wasn't content to just share his money with the man. He stayed and engaged the man on a first-name basis. In the end, Nicholas gave him something more valuable than a handout. By treating him as a fellow human being, as a child of God, Nicholas affirmed the man's dignity as someone worthy of recognition by another.

Guided by a deep and abiding faith, Bob Carlsen has been committed to helping the forgotten and marginalized see God's love not as a distant concept but a reality in their lives. He embodies the Maryknoll spirit, celebrating Jesus' call to all at the global table of service.

As a board member, Bob is excited about the future of Maryknoll Lay Missioners. And Maryknoll Lay Missioners is excited to have him as an integral part of its family.

*Patrick Norberto is the Donor Relations Officer of Maryknoll Lay Missioners.*

*Above far left: Bob Carlsen with his wife, Patricia, and son, Nicholas, walking the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage in Spain.*

*Above left: On a Friends Across Borders trip to Tanzania, Bob Carlsen (right) and his friend and fellow board member Mike Cammarota talk with young people during bead making at the Uzima Centre in Mwanza. The center, led by Maryknoll lay missionary Joan Miya, supports people living with HIV and vulnerable children.*

*Left: Bob Carlsen (left) and Mike Cammarota with children during a Maryknoll immersion trip to Nepal.*



*Leave a legacy of generosity... Make a bequest.*

Please consider remembering Maryknoll Lay Missioners with a legacy gift in your will or living trust.

Your decision to include Maryknoll Lay Missioners as a beneficiary reflects your belief in our common call to help build God's reign on earth.

Your gift will allow us to ensure the future of our ministries—and help us to create a more just and compassionate world.



For additional information and for sample language, please contact:  
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# NEWS

## JUBILEE

This year's **Jubilee reunion** of classes with anniversaries divisible by 5 will be held **July 31-August 2**. [mklm.org/returned-missioners/jubilee/](http://mklm.org/returned-missioners/jubilee/)



## ASYLUM LAW

In February, Maryknoll lay missionary **Heidi Cerneka** participated in "Making the Case for Asylum," a conference in San Salvador organized by Cristosal for lawyers working in asylum law.

## ASIA SOUTH GATHERING

### CAMBODIA REGION

In January the Cambodia region said farewell to **James Havey** and welcomed new missionary **Julie Lawler**. The annual **Maryknoll Asia South Gathering** at the Salesian retreat house in Hua Hin, Thailand, once again brought together Maryknoll priests and brothers, sisters and lay missionaries. Director of Missions **Marj Humphrey** attended and subsequently visited missionaries, ministries and mission partners in Cambodia.

## SPEAKING AT UN CONGRESS

### KYOTO, JAPAN

In April, Maryknoll lay missionaries **Joanne Blaney** (see photo) and **Heidi Cerneka** were scheduled to make presentations at the **United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice** in Kyoto, Japan. Joanne was to speak about restorative justice as an alternative to mass incarceration and Heidi on the criminalization of immigration. At press time, the congress was canceled because of COVID19, and no new time was announced.



## REGIONAL DIRECTORS



**Hang Tran** has been named the new regional director for Cambodia, and **Steve Veryser** is now the area director for Tanzania and Kenya/South Sudan.

## AFFILIATE CONFERENCE

The **Maryknoll Affiliate Conference** will be held **June 25-28** in Garrison, New York. For further information and to register, go to [mkmac.org](http://mkmac.org).



## UNITY GOVERNMENT

### JUBA, SOUTH SUDAN

The recent creation of a unity government in South Sudan, Maryknoll lay missionary **Gabe Hurrish** reports, "caught everyone by surprise. There are mixed emotions among the population about this decision." There is much skepticism about the two principal leaders, **President Salva Kiir** and his vice president, **Riek Machar**, who leads the main opposition group. "The leadership void leads to difficulty in working as government becomes more complex to deal with."



## SOLAR WATER PUMP

### MUSOMA, TANZANIA

Maryknoll lay missionaries **Angelica Ruppe** and **Kevin McDonough** collaborated on a garden irrigation project at **St. Justin Centre for Children with Disabilities** in Musoma. Angelica helped to secure the funding and Kevin created the specs for the solar panels, tank and pump and is supervising implementation. The project, scheduled for completion in April, will provide irrigation to a 1.5-acre garden to provide food and income generation for St. Justin's with sustainable solar energy.

## FORMATION SEMINAR

The Advanced Missionary Disciples Formation Seminar, "**Proclaiming Joy in a Chaotic World**," will be held Aug. 3-7 at the Maryknoll Center in Los Altos, California. [mission.maryknoll.us/2020amdfp-0](http://mission.maryknoll.us/2020amdfp-0)



Kobe refugee camp in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia / PHOTO Jiro Ose (UNICEF file photo via Flickr)

## Dee Dungy advocates for refugees in Kenyan and Ethiopian camps

In her role as regional advocacy coordinator for Jesuit Refugee Service in Nairobi, **Dee Dungy** recently made **fact-finding visits to five refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia**. She was monitoring compliance with United Nations mandates that are to ensure gender equality in education and women's empowerment. She also looked at inclusive, quality special-needs education require-

ments, including teacher training, and compliance with national school exam standards.

Dee visited adult literacy classes, women's livelihood skills training, and assessed issues related to women's contributions to sustainability. The vast majority of refugees in these camps are from Somalia, Eritrea and South Sudan and are under the age of 20.

## Friends Across Borders trip to El Salvador

In February the El Salvador region welcomed 13 visitors for a **Friends Across Borders trip**. The group experienced the many different ministries of Maryknoll lay missionaries there—from offering Catholic Worker hospitality in the city center to environmental advocacy and children's literacy in the countryside.

All came with open eyes and returned to the United States with full hearts—and new questions to prompt discussion in their hometowns.



FAB participants at the memorial for the four martyred U.S. church women. They held a prayer service at the site.

Right: U.S. Border Patrol agent Carlos Antunez answers questions from retreat participants at the border fence in El Paso.



# What's the next right step?

*Six strangers, five days, one goal: to listen and discern God's call.*

| BY KAREN BORTVEDT |

**T**hey traveled to El Paso, Texas, for Maryknoll Lay Missioners' first ever "Discerning through Service" retreat at the U.S.-Mexico border.

They arrived as strangers from Chicago, New York, Maryland, Connecticut and from just outside El Paso; they left as a community. Following the see-judge-act methodology of Catholic Action, the six retreat participants wanted to see the reality at the border and learn about the structures, systems and people behind today's border-crisis headlines.

Together they took the time to judge by listening for the messages God was speaking to them through their encounters on the border, the experiences that brought them to the retreat and the

time with one another.

And they departed eager to act and figure out the next right steps to follow that call in their own lives.

"The next right step" was a phrase lay missionary Heidi Cerneka repeatedly used while talking to participants about following their call while in El Paso. But how does one figure out that next right step?

For Peggy Dolan, a librarian from Connecticut, coming on this retreat had already been a next right step. She had known of Maryknoll for years and had joined a Friends Across Borders trip to Tanzania in 2018. That trip had been her first intentional step toward mission after beginning to feel that call. Seeing Maryknoll lay missionaries in action there had led her to the retreat to

deepen her discernment.

Karen Bortvedt, Maryknoll Lay Missioners' recruitment and relationship manager; Maryknoll Sister Arlene Trant, mission educator; and Yvonne Dilling, a Texas-based mission educator/promoter with the Maryknoll Society, led the retreat. They teamed up with the Encuentro Project, a collaborative immersion and service project in El Paso, to set up moments of encounter throughout the week. The retreat also provided times to reflect and judge where those rumblings within each person may be calling them to step next.

The many "border experts" they had an opportunity to learn from included Marisa Limón Garza from the Hope Border Institute. Marisa explained the border policies and related them to the call of

Catholics to respond.

The retreat in El Paso coincided with the end of International Migration Week, and participants joined El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz in a Mass to pray for all those who migrate and whose lives are intertwined with people on the move. Bishop Seitz has taken a leadership role among U.S. bishops in advocating for migrants at the border.

Retreat participants had an opportunity to serve migrants by welcoming guests at one of the local migrant shelters. Although the current draconian government policies and practices at the border have greatly reduced the numbers of migrants at shelters in El Paso, the participants had an opportunity to share a meal with and listen to the stories of those receiving hospitality there. The group was also

able to contribute to several maintenance projects, so that migrants coming to the shelter in the future will find an even more welcoming space.

At the shelter, they also talked with long-term volunteers on the border. With each interaction, the numbers and headlines became people with names, stories, experiences, and grief—people who were profoundly, and at great risk, taking their next right steps with little certainty as to where their own journey would take them.

Reflecting on these experiences after returning home, Letty Macias said, "I am a firm believer that our Lord places us with people and in circumstances within God's perfect timing at any given moment. I have not stopped thanking God for the Maryknoll discernment retreat and for meeting all the wonderful retreatants and missionaries!"

The day the retreat ended, she submitted an application to begin volunteering locally in El Paso alongside Maryknoll lay missionary

Heidi Cerneka. Letty brings with her not only decades of experience as an educator but also a local network of retired educators and social service providers whom she is now organizing to serve in their own backyard.

For Letty, being involved locally is the next right step, as she prepares to apply to become a lay missionary wherever God may call her to serve.

Letty was not alone in experiencing a deepened desire to "mission in place," as retreatant Janet Tullo called it when speaking about her ongoing work with migrants in New York. Robbie Anderson shares Janet's sentiment, "I took home a yearning to help asylum seekers and am now exploring ways to do that in Chicago while discerning a long-term mission."

At the beginning of each discernment retreat, facilitators always emphasize, "We are not here to give you a call to Maryknoll, the call does not come from us. We are here to create space—a space to discern, to encounter, to reflect free from the normal



chaos that fills our lives."

Being in that space together can be powerful. Everyone has their own unique call, but can at the same time help others to listen to or reflect back the messages God provides. In that communion, all are called to determine their next right step.

**Karen Bortvedt is the recruitment and relationship manager of Maryknoll Lay Missioners.**

**Above Retreat participants meet with El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz.**

Standing (from left): Maryknoll lay missionary Heidi Cerneka, Lou Tullo, Bishop Seitz, Letty Macias, Francis Wayne and Sister Arlene Trant, MM. Kneeling (from left): Robbie Anderson, Peggy Dolan, Janet Tullo, Yvonne Dilling, Karen Bortvedt and Father Rafael Garcia, SJ

## Wondering if Maryknoll Lay Missioners is for you?



Maryknoll lay missionary Minh Nguyen in Tacopaya, Bolivia (PHOTO Nile Sprague)

Join one of our Discernment Retreats to find out:

- July 24-26, Chicago
- October 9-11, Los Altos, CA



Contact [retreats@mklm.org](mailto:retreats@mklm.org) or 914-467-8857 for more information and to register.

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