

SHARED VISIONS

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Volume Fifteen, Number Two

— A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers — presented by the people who bring you *Connections* —

Communication: Volunteers at Work and at Home



This edition of *Shared Visions* focuses on *strengthening communication patterns* among volunteers in the workplace as well as within the volunteers' community. Several activities invite you to explore whether you see patterns in the way males and females typically use language and converse with one another.

Also, given that Advent and the Christmas season are

upon us, we invite you to reflect on *the significance of Jesus' coming*, and we offer ways of honoring simple living amid the commercial chaos. From us former volunteers to you current volunteers, we hope you enjoy the holidays.

How are You Communicating in Your Workplace?

As a volunteer, you spend a great deal of time and energy grappling with how to communicate with the people with whom you work. How well you are able to do this often determines your whole impression of how your volunteer experience is going. So take some time now and give yourself a chance to reflect on what your experience of communicating in your workplace has meant to you.

- * Often, the volunteer experience is the first time a volunteer has ever had a full-time job. If this is the case for you, ask yourself: How has your experience of communicating with people at your volunteer workplace differed from your previous work experiences? Did that difference reveal itself gracefully, or was it a rude awakening? (If this wasn't the case for you, ask yourself: How has this colored

your experience differently than that of others?)

- * Whether you are a teacher, a counselor, or a house manager, your words may very well carry more authority and responsibility than you have been used to having. How does that feel – good, bad, awkward, liberating? How does that shape your relationships with others?
- * Depending on your experience, you may have already had some communication problems at work: a new language, a difficult dialect, people talking too fast or slow. How have these problems changed the way you communicate? What insights into your own personal growth can you take from this struggle?

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Quotes and Questions for Communication in



At this point in your year(s) of service, you know the value of community. One way to maintain and foster community is by improving communication. This reflection uses various passages from Jean Vanier’s “Community & Growth” to illustrate the importance of effective communication within community.

For personal reflection

“Community is made of the gentle concern that people show in the every day. It is made of small gestures, of services and sacrifices which say ‘I love you’ and ‘I’m happy to be with you.’ It is letting the other go in front of you, not trying to prove that you are right in a discussion; it is taking small burdens for the other.” (page19)

1. What are some of the “small gestures” that you do to communicate to your community members?
2. Have you found that nonverbal communication has played a role in community conflicts and misunderstandings? If so, please name some examples.

“There is a feminine principle in each man, just as there is a masculine principle in each woman. We are all a mixture of passive and active. But it remains true that their different physiological make-ups give men and women particular tendencies: men are more turned towards the external world and women, by the fact of childbearing, towards relationships. Neither is superior in the heart of God...but it is why there has to be cooperation and recognition of the gifts of both sexes.” (page 160)

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(How are You Communicating..., continued from page 1)

- * Is there anything in the way co-workers, clients or students speak to you that you feel discounts your value, perhaps because of your age or because you are ‘just a volunteer?’ Or, on the contrary, do your co-workers or clients express their appreciation, e.g., because you are a volunteer? What are some ways you can respond to their discounts or approvals?

1. How do male and female differences affect your relationships with members of your community, your family?
2. To what extent do you agree that men and women differ in the gifts they bring to communication?

“Communication is vital in a loving community. The early Christians did not always agree. Sometimes they were angry at one another. But they loved one another so they made efforts to communicate. They tried to work out their differences, each one struggling to understand the point of view of the other . . . Beg Jesus for the openness and freedom to communicate with others so that together you may become more fully human.”

1. Vanier suggests that openness within a community leads to becoming “more fully human.” What does this phrase mean to you? Can you think of any examples of people who lead a life devoted to exploring the fullness of humanity?
2. What are some of the challenges to being fully open with your community members?

For community sharing

Use similar questions, or any insights you’ve gained from this activity, to start a discussion with your community members about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the way you currently communicate. You might start with questions about the point of view of others, rather than starting with a possibly polarizing initial insight of your own.

Conclusion: If you had a particularly strong reaction to any of the above questions, consider sharing your responses with fellow volunteers or a trusted co-worker and ask for thoughts and suggestions of how they see you communicating in your workplace. How are they doing with their own communication?

Listen Up! Gender Communication in the Volunteer House: A Role Play

No matter who is in your house, no matter how many women and men there are, there are certain frustrating situations when your reaction is simply: “Man!” (funny how we use that word, huh?)

But seriously, folks, no matter how high-minded we might be, we perceive gender differences in many, if not all, of life’s experiences. And whether there are five men and two women in your house, or four women and one man (or even no men at all), the volunteer house can be a hotbed of frustration and confusion around gender roles.

In this exercise, community members will have a chance to play out roles as they themselves see them. Don’t be afraid to exaggerate – the more “over the top” your performance, the more it will hit home with the other participants. This role play should help community members come to see how others see them; hopefully, it will encourage a more open conversation about which gender roles are helpful to community interaction, and which are detrimental. So be expressive and outlandish, but please – be kind as well. Remember, you really do have to see each other again in the morning (literally).

Instructions

Make two name tags on whole sheets of paper that say “HE” and “SHE”. One *woman* should volunteer to take the “HE” name tag, and, hence, the first role play scenario; one *man* should take the “SHE” name tag and the first scenario as well.

Each role-player should make at least two comments regarding the scenario, in keeping with how “HE” sees a man or how “SHE” sees a woman approaching the situation – at least one comment expressing their attitude toward the situation, and at least one responding to the other person. Try to keep each scenario under two minutes (don’t drag it on and on, as you have several to do).

After each scenario is over, the “HE” role-player assigns her name tag to another woman, the “SHE” role-player assigns his to another man, and the two new role-players act out the next scenario. Repeat performances are encouraged if you don’t have either three women or three men in your community.



SCENARIO #1: After a few months of living together, the community has come together to discuss the fact that certain chores aren’t getting done regularly and by everyone equally – specifically, the trash isn’t being taken out on time, and the bathroom isn’t being cleaned enough.



SCENARIO #2: The community’s one and only car needs to get fixed, and the community members are trying to decide who will be the one to bring it to the shop.



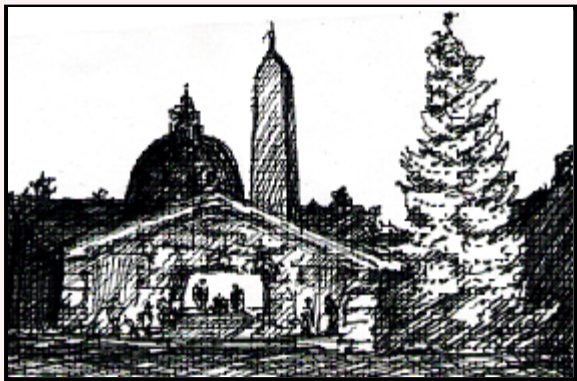
SCENARIO #3: One of the community members decides to go out on a date during the designated Community Night; some of the others don’t agree with that decision.



Here’s the surprise twist: After you have finished these three scenarios, have the same people play them again, only this time play them **as yourselves**.

When you are finished, ask yourselves and each other if the characterizations in the first run-through correspond at all to the performances in the second? How well were the people in the first run-through communicating? How about in the second run-through? What attitudes and reactions seemed helpful to the interaction between community members, and which didn’t? Finally, give yourselves high marks for bravery and honesty. Not everybody would examine gender roles so frankly, but it’s helpful to do so.

Biblical Reflection: *What's Your Theology of Christmas?*



Each of the New Testament's gospels takes a different approach to Jesus' birth. Matthew (1:18 – 2:23), for example, tells of the star guiding the Magi and Jesus escaping Herod, while Luke (2:1 – 20) tells of Mary swaddling her infant, as well as of the adoring angels and the shepherds who went from their initial confusion to confidence in telling the Christmas story to others. John's gospel skips the human touches and affirms Jesus as the divine Word, the Light who came into human darkness. Mark bypasses Jesus' birth and begins with his baptism as an adult.

At Christmas time, Christians relish celebrating the warm images of Jesus' night-time birth in a poor stable. He is surrounded by his loving family and heaven seems to bend to earth as the star and angels pay their homage, as do the poor shepherds and wealthy Magi.

Along with the celebration of this human aspect of Jesus' coming, it's important to continue exploring the question of the 'why' behind his Incarnation: Why do YOU think Jesus came and was born into the human family?

Directions for group discussion: Choose one member of the community to be the facilitator of this activity. He or she begins by saying the following: "The purpose of this exercise is to explore together our personal responses to the question of why we think Jesus was born. Choose which of the following you think is the best theological answer and then share your thoughts with your fellow volunteers."

[If any volunteers are willing to do some initial reading, they could ground their selection by reviewing the context of the above gospel references. Or, after group discussion, they could follow up with further research and revisit the question in a follow-up meeting.]

Facilitator: Read each of the possible answers below and say: "Listen carefully to each of the following purposes of why Jesus was born. Choose which one makes the most sense to you at this time and consider your reasons for making that choice."

The purpose of Jesus' incarnation was . . .

- a) to save us from the sin of Adam and Eve
- b) so by his death on the cross he would please his Father
- c) to provide an example for how to live humanly
- d) to save us as a people from our social (big-time) sins and individual, personal sins
- e) to reveal God to us more fully
- f) to fulfill Old Testament prophecies
- g) so we may have eternal life after death
- h) so we may have life to the fullest
- i) other answer: design your response to this question

Facilitator: After each member of the volunteer community has taken a few minutes to consider his/her best answer, say: "Who believed choice a) (read it aloud) was the best purpose, and please say a few words why you selected 'a')." Do the same for each of the possible answers. Then, after having listened to each community member's choice, ask: "Does anyone want to change his/her initial selection? If so, what aspect did you find compelling about your new choice?"

Conclusion: Like the above diversity found among the four gospels, the purpose of this discussion is not to prove one theological choice as better than the other. Each choice is rooted in a set of assumptions and each affirms particular values, a context and theme. One or another choice, such as b), to please the Father, may be rooted in ancient imagery (Isaac sacrificing his son Jacob in Genesis 22) and so may be more difficult to understand. Others, such as h), so we may have life to the fullest (John 10:10), may challenge us to imagine living so the divine life emerges from within our selves. We hope your celebration of Jesus' birth is both comforting and challenging throughout your time of volunteer service.

Five Ways to Simplify Your Christmas

(These ideas and others can be found in the archives at www.SimpleLiving.org.)

1. Prepare a take-out party to share with someone you know who is homebound. Put hot chocolate mix, cookies, napkins, cups, a book, a game, a video, etc., into a creative package (baskets work well for this). Then take the party to the person's home and spend the evening enjoying it together.
2. Offer alternatives for gift giving. Write a letter to family & friends sharing your feelings about Christmas giving. Suggest gifts you would like to receive - e.g., a donation to a soup kitchen, homemade ornaments, a calendar made with old pictures. See www.pallotticenter.org/Alternative_gift.htm for a list of other alternative gift ideas.
3. Read the Christmas story together from Luke 2:1-20. Have everyone draw pictures of different scenes from the story on a long piece of shelf paper. Or try retelling the story in modern-day terms.
4. Designate one meal as the Good News Meal. Only good news may be shared! (No complaining or whining allowed!)
5. Consider singing a song every night after dinner. Borrow songbooks from church, the library or get "Carols with Justice" from www.SimpleLiving.org.

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The mission of the St. Vincent Pallotti Center

To promote lay volunteer service that challenges laity, clergy, and religious to work together in the mission of the Church. Our goal is to support lay volunteers before, during and after their term of service. Regional Pallotti Centers are located in Boston; Paterson, NJ; St. Louis; and Oakland, CA. The National Office is in Washington, DC.

The Centers take their inspiration from Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850) who believed passionately in the laity, in each person as being an image of God and as called to be missionary.

Shared Visions' goal is to explore five building blocks of spiritual development: Intellectual Growth, Emotional and Physical Health, Leadership and Prayer.

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