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CIVIC VENTURES **6** **INNOVATIONS**

Photographs by Alex Harris

Essay by Rob Gurwitt

Finding God in All Things: Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps

INTRODUCTION BY MARC FREEDMAN

INNOVATIONS profiles the work of creative organizations that engage older Americans in new and compelling ways to revitalize their communities. The series—part of the documentary project REINVENTING AGE—is published by Civic Ventures, a nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming the aging of America into a source of individual and social renewal.

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Finding God in All Things: Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps

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We would like to thank the ILVC volunteers, agency staff, and clients for sharing stories of their work and their lives with us and allowing time for our visits. We are especially grateful to Mike O'Donnell for his patience in responding to our many questions and for making possible the photographic sessions. We also extend special thanks to Jim Conroy, Charlie Costello, Jim Scanlon, and Eileen Capshaw for providing helpful information and insight about the program.

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FRONT COVER: *Tom Coyne, St. Peter's Church, Tri-Parish Community, Baltimore, Maryland*

BACK COVER: *Ann Wagner, After School Program, St. Jerome's Church, Tri-Parish Community, Baltimore, Maryland*



The people drawn to work with organizations highlighted in our Innovations series are motivated by different reasons: to help a person in need, to build new relationships and feel connected, to find ways of addressing larger societal issues. The thread that runs throughout is a sense of seeking something, of bringing a spiritual dimension to the work—whether this stems from a person’s formal faith tradition or is more personal and idiosyncratic in nature.

This Innovations issue offers perhaps the most explicit example of the spiritual focus: an organization created by two Jesuit priests who witnessed a strong yearning from lay people for spiritual growth and service to others.

The Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps, or ILVC as it’s known, is rooted in the Catholic spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits. ILVC draws people age 50 and older who have retired from their midlife careers but choose to continue working—with food banks, homeless shelters, prison ministries, literacy programs, and other groups that offer services

for the poor in their communities. It started small with only 11 volunteers in three East Coast cities, mushrooming since 1995 to encompass more than 200 people working in eight regions from Baltimore to San Diego.

By design, the volunteers are not only doing much-needed work but also reflecting on what it means in their own lives. They capture thoughts and feelings in a spiritual journal and meet with a “spiritual reflector” and other volunteers along their journey. This “contemplation in the midst of action” is a cornerstone of the program that helps temper the frustrations inevitable in fighting poverty.

Indeed, the ILVC volunteers do work that challenges our traditional notion of what it means to succeed. In the volunteers’ midlife careers, success often meant setting goals and achieving tangible results. In choosing to grapple with some of our society’s most intractable problems, ILVC and its volunteers must embrace a different kind of victory: solving day-to-day problems and mitigating, often at the most basic level, the human suffering in front of them. It is a goal that they take on with zeal, intent on doing *something* to help.

The story of the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps and its work in one city comprise this sixth issue of Innovations. The ongoing series by some of America’s foremost photographers, writers, and radio producers is designed to bring to life, and to light, the work of creative organizations with the potential to reshape what it means to grow older in this country—to help transform the aging of America into a new source of civic renewal.

—Marc Freedman

Finding God in All Things

Essay by Rob Gurmitt | Photographs by Alex Harris

TOM COYNE WAS PLANNING TO DEAL WITH THE RATS. After drug addicts broke into the church garage looking for something to steal, he'd nailed a board over the hole they left. Now rats are gnawing through the plywood, so he'd like to upgrade to a few sheets of aluminum flashing. But arriving for work this morning he met one of the nuns, who told him that the light in the rectory hall isn't working. Perched awkwardly on a ladder in the dim hallway, testing it, he shorts out the circuit, so now the lights are off not only in the hall, but in half of the church office. And in the hunt for the right circuit, he's discovered that someone has knocked a door off its hinges in the social hall. Even worse, something is wrong with the electronic bingo board down there. Tonight is bingo night, the only reliable source of church funds, so the board has to get fixed right away. The garage door will wait.

Then again, something always has to wait. St. Peter's Catholic Church in Baltimore, Maryland, was built in 1842, and though still serene and beautiful, it's creaky. So are the two nearby churches to which Tom Coyne also attends, St. Martin's—built in 1865 as a Civil War hospital—and St. Jerome's, built in 1887 in the area known as Pigtown, after the swine that once were brought in by boat and run through the streets to the slaughterhouse. All three churches, once the seats of thriving Catholic parishes, now form one inner-city ministry with a single priest. Tom is their handyman. He's in just two days a week, but at least

they have him. Before he came it was up to the priest, a ruddy, energetic Franciscan named John Harvey, to keep the churches and their assorted out-buildings going.

"We have 11 buildings, and all are old," says Father Harvey. "But Tom's willing to tackle anything." He fixes broken toilets, and the hole in St. Peter's roof created by some New Year's celebrant shooting bullets in the air, and St. Jerome's immense, brass votive candleholder, which fell and burst apart years ago. When someone reached through the mail slot and broke into the rectory at St. Martin's—it's just down the street from the most notorious drug corner in Baltimore, the one made famous by the book and HBO miniseries *The Corner*—he moved the slot. He repairs stairs and floor tiles, rewires sound systems, puts in exhaust fans, paints rooms, tries to stay on top of the myriad little problems that crop up each week.

It is prosaic work, but not every minute of it. He was working in St. Peter's one day, in the soaring Romanesque sanctuary with daylight filtering hazily through the old stained glass windows, oblivious to the grand marble altar silently overseen by statues of four apostles and St. Peter. "I was hammering, paying attention to my work," he says, "when I noticed the sun coming through the skylight over the altar. It just takes your breath away. I stopped. I realized I *had* to stop. There's a line from the Old Testament, 'Pause awhile, be silent, and know that I am God.' So I sat awhile."

“People this age have already experienced loss, they’ve seen suffering, they know what life is. You can either embrace human reality or you can run from it. These people are willing to get messy.”

Even in the midst of, say, fixing a broken garage door opener, Tom will get the sense that he’s not on his own. “I feel like there’s things I do beyond my capabilities,” he says, “but they turn out anyway. It’s not just me, it’s God working next to me. And my wife.” His wife, Eleanor, died about six years ago, before he started working for Father Harvey. “She believed that if she prayed to St. Anthony, he’d help her find things she’d lost. I used to laugh because I believed God didn’t intervene in our lives. But now, when I can’t find something I say, ‘C’mon, Eleanor! Help me find it! And there it will be.”

Tom Coyne, it should be said, is not just in this because he likes the work, although he does. He is a former data processing executive, retired from a local bank, and he lives out in the suburbs. For the last five years he has commuted in to the Tri-Parish Catholic Community in inner-city West Baltimore. He does this as a member of the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps, a group founded by two Jesuit priests that began in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia, and now works in eight regions around the country. Its members, lay Catholics who are at least 50 years old, spend their volunteer time in organizations

directly serving the poor: food pantries, literacy programs, prison ministries, counseling centers, housing groups, and the occasional parish.

They do good work. As Father Jim Conroy, one of ILVC’s founders, says, “People this age have already experienced loss, they’ve seen suffering, they know what life is. You can either embrace human reality or you can run from it. These people are willing to get messy.” The group is imbued with the devotion to worldly engagement preached by the Jesuits’ founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola, who in essence believed that prayer and involvement in the world were one and the same. “It is not sufficient to sit back and say, ‘I believe!’” explains Father Conroy. “There’s an active embrace of the world that’s required. To do as Christ did.”

But ILVC is not simply an organization of volunteers; it is also an organization *for* volunteers, a ministry both to those it serves and to those who do the serving. It strives to avoid what Father Charlie Costello, the group’s other founder, calls “the heresy of action — of activism without prayer or a relationship with God.” If it is devoted to good works, it is equally devoted to strengthening its members’ relationship with God through prayer and reflection. Father Costello likes to quote a line from T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Dry Salvages*: “We had the experience but missed the

meaning.” All too often in this country, he says, “volunteers are given a lot of work to do, but get no opportunity to sit back and reflect. Ours is not a culture of reflection.” So, in response, ILVC’s very much is. Its members spend their time not only working for the organizations they serve, they also meet once a month with a “spiritual reflector,” either a priest or a lay person familiar with Ignatian thought, who helps them explore the spiritual dimensions of their experiences; they keep spiritual journals in which they record their own thoughts about what they’ve seen; they meet once a month with the other volunteers in their city to talk about their organizations and their experiences; and three times a year they get together for retreats. “The culture around us is saturated, overstimulated to the point we’re numb,” says Father Conroy. “Yet what we seek most is meaning.”

I do not believe I ever considered myself better than someone else but I always recognized certain differences. The differences seem to blur the more I am open to the clients served by St. A’s. . . . The permanent staff at St. A’s seems very open to the needs of the poor and gentle in enforcing necessary rules. They are moved more by the Spirit than by the operating rules and regulations. Still, they worry about paying bills and handling some difficult crisis situations. Oh Lord, we have to trust in you. Where else could we go? We must do what we can, when we can, where we can.—*From an October 16, 1997, entry in the spiritual journal kept by Jim Sheridan, an ILVC volunteer in Baltimore who was working at the St. Ambrose Family Outreach Center, which runs a shelter, emergency food pantry, and literacy program.*



Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps

The Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps (ILVC) involves women and men age 50 and older working with and advocating for the poor in their communities and reflecting on these experiences in the Jesuit tradition. Two Jesuit priests started the program in 1995 in three East Coast cities; ILVC has expanded to more than 200 volunteers working in eight regions across the country. Volunteers typically work two days a week for 10 months each year at agencies in their local area. They also are asked to meet regularly with a spiritual reflector, participate in periodic group meetings with other area volunteers, and keep a spiritual journal to reflect on their work.

Getting Started

The Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps is firmly grounded in the teachings of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Jesuits' founder who preached the importance of being actively involved in the world and believed in "contemplation in the midst of action."

The vision for the organization grew out of discussions in the mid-1990s by two Jesuit priests, Fathers Charlie Costello and Jim Conroy. They had gained insight over the years through some of their own work, particularly Father Conroy's role as the director of novices and Father Costello's experiences with Jesuit secondary schools across the country. They recognized — from both parents of the young Jesuits and many of the high school teachers — an eagerness on the part of lay people in the Catholic Church who were seeking ways to grow spiritually and help others in their community.

The two priests responded to that call by creating the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps, an organization that focuses on working with the poor and reflecting on that ministry. They also decided to involve volunteers who were retired or close to retirement, people both with time to offer and a desire for further spiritual growth.

The first 11 volunteers began work in September 1995 in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia. The program has grown both in volunteers and locations each year since then, at first concentrat-

ing on the East Coast, then expanding to the Midwest, and reaching as far as San Diego by 2001. Each new location has had a unique way of developing: In some cases, ILVC national staff identified the need for a program in a particular area. In other places, an individual or an existing social service agency contacted ILVC and sought to have the program grow to their city.

The local organizations partnering with ILVC (what ILVC calls its Service Project Agencies) provide services to or advocate for the poor, which historically has been a central ministry for the Jesuits. Volunteers are assigned to agencies such as homeless shelters and outreach programs, AIDS and cancer hospices, adult literacy programs, employment training and counseling programs, housing aid centers, after-school tutoring and mentoring programs, food banks, immigration services, prisons, and refugee resettlement agencies.

Volunteers work two days a week from September through June. Staff in some northern regions, however, are exploring a different model where ILVC volunteers

work through the summer but take off in the winter months.

In addition to their work for an organization, volunteers devote time to individual and group reflection, a key element of the ILVC program and one that distinguishes it. Volunteers write thoughts and feelings about their experiences in a spiritual journal. Once a month, they meet with a spiritual reflector, a person trained in Ignatian spirituality, to talk about their service experience and their own spiritual growth. Spiritual reflectors may be Jesuit priests but many are lay people with a connection to and understanding of Ignatian teachings. The reflectors meet with about three volunteers each month and are offered a small stipend.

Volunteers also are asked to attend a monthly group meeting and three retreats or days of reflection a year to share what they're experiencing and learning, and to pray and reflect together with other ILVC volunteers. Typically there are regional overnight retreats to begin and end the volunteer year in September and May, and a day of reflection in January.

Regional directors hold an orientation for new volunteers that covers the basics of the ILVC program, including such topics as techniques for journaling, how to get the most from sessions with a spiritual reflector, and what to expect at group meetings. On-site training is left to the agency where a volunteer is placed.

Staffing and Operations

ILVC has a small national staff with offices at a Baltimore church. While the organization searches for a new executive director, two full-time staff members are sharing interim director responsibilities: Mike O'Donnell serves as acting program director and Eileen Capshaw is acting administrative director (while continuing her role as director of development and communications). In addition, two Jesuit priests work part time as co-directors for spirituality, and there are plans to hire a part-time administrative assistant. A 16-member board of directors oversees the nonprofit organization.

ILVC's eight regions are run locally by a paid regional director. Most work on their own three days a week; one director has hired administrative support while some others occasionally bring in temporary workers or volunteers to help. Regions range in geographical size from a single city to multiple metropolitan areas. Within the eight regions, there are a total of 15 city groups, the most local representation of ILVC where the volunteers gather monthly for reflection and prayer. By region, the city groups are located as follows: three in the region of Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and northern Virginia; three in the region of Rochester, Syracuse, and Elmira, New York; two in the region comprised of New York City and Long Island; two in the Philadelphia and Central New Jersey region; two in the Cleveland

and Detroit region; and one each in the regions of Minneapolis/St. Paul, Chicago, and San Diego.

All but a few of the national and regional staff members are lay people. "The Jesuit community has been cheering the position of lay leadership in the Church," says Mike O'Donnell, who also serves as the regional director for Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and northern Virginia. "They see ILVC as one avenue for that to happen."

Nationwide, ILVC has about 200 volunteers who are retired from their midlife careers, or at least have cut back to part-time roles on the road toward retiring, and are seeking ways to contribute in their community. The majority are in their 60s or 70s, with a few younger or older than that, and the numbers are roughly even along gender lines. While ILVC staff would like to see greater ethnic and racial diversity, says O'Donnell, most volunteers are Caucasian.

Nearly all volunteers are Catholic, although it's not a prerequisite. Participants do need to be Christian and feel generally comfortable around Catholic forms of worship, which they encounter at group meetings and retreats. Their work experience is quite diverse: from business executives who were short on time but always wanted to do more in their communities to those who have been doing volunteer work throughout their lives. However, many more ILVC volunteers come from the business world than from social service roles.

More than 80 percent of the volunteers renew their volunteer role year after year. The smaller percentage who don't return after the first year typically have had a difficult time truly committing to the program as it is designed, says O'Donnell. Or in some cases, retired government workers were asked to return to their former jobs part time after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Long-term volunteers who choose to leave the program most often have a major life event that prevents them from continuing.

ILVC volunteers usually learn about the program from other volunteers, their church bulletin, a local newspaper article, or an ad in a Jesuit publication. People interested in the program complete a four-page application along with references from people who can attest to the person's work or community experience and spiritual background. They also meet with the regional director and one other person—typically a long-time volunteer or spiritual reflector—to discuss their background and learn more about the program. While it's rare, an applicant could be turned down, particularly if the person does not seem able or willing to participate in all aspects of the ILVC program.

ILVC places its volunteers with local organizations serving the poor—now about 150 nationwide. The organizations are asked to contribute a cost-sharing fee of \$1,000 a year for each volunteer placed with them and have liability insurance to cover any job-related injuries.

Staff at local organizations might learn about ILVC through other agencies participating in the program. ILVC staff also seek out possible partners by networking in the community and with current volunteers. Adding a new agency begins with a phone call and application. The regional director then does a site visit and interview to get a clearer sense of the organization and the type of volunteer placements available.

Costs and Funding

The annual operating budget for the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps is \$500,000, which includes the costs for the national office and the eight regions. While costs vary from region to region, about 80 percent of the budget funds program-related costs, such as volunteer recruitment, training, and placement; regional director salaries; and retreats. Another 10 percent covers expenses for the national office, including rent, utilities, and personnel costs. And 10 percent is budgeted for costs related to raising funds and further promoting the program.

One program cost particular to ILVC is the \$15 an hour paid to spiritual reflectors for their work with volunteers. Many of the reflectors, however, donate their stipend back to the organization. In addition, most of the regional directors work in rent-free office space at a local Catholic church.

In FY2002, approximately 7 percent of the funding for ILVC came from administrative fees paid by the agencies where volunteers

work. (The \$1,000 fee per volunteer can be reduced or, at times, is waived if a service agency cannot afford to pay it.) Jesuit provinces and Jesuit communities added 29 percent of the funding. Another 25 percent of the budget was funded by individuals, mainly through an annual appeal. Private foundations provided the remaining 39 percent. Some foundations offer funding that specifically covers administrative fees for agencies unable to pay them.

Expansion

Expansion in areas currently served by ILVC varies by region and is largely based on responding to the needs in a particular area. For example, ILVC expanded to Virginia after there was strong interest from volunteers who lived in that area but didn't want to commute to Washington, D.C., for the program.

There are no immediate plans to expand to new cities or regions, but ILVC staff have looked at Cincinnati and Los Angeles as two possible new areas in the future, says Mike O'Donnell. Board and staff members also have begun to discuss whether ILVC, now largely focused in urban areas, should move into more rural areas as well.

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