

Dossier:

Lay People in Mission: Bridge Builders

This dossier on lay missionaries was compiled by Sam Stanton, Executive Director of Maryknoll Lay Missioners, a Catholic organization inspired by the mission of Jesus that has sent 700 lay missionaries to live and work with poor communities in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, and Dennis Gira, consulter to the editorial board of Spiritus and former vice-director of the Institut de science et des religions at l'Institut catholique de Paris. The dossier analyses the meaning of the expression lay missionary and describes the structures that help these men and women respond to their vocation, what goes into the making of a lay missionary, what these missionaries do in mission and what they do when return to the United States.

I. The Birth and Growth of an Association of Lay Missioners

To illustrate what the term “lay missionary” implies today we will examine closely the development of Maryknoll Lay Missioners (MKLM)¹, a group of Catholic laymen and laywomen dedicated to mission. Formally known as the Maryknoll Mission Association of the Faithful, MKLM collaborates closely with the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers (The Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, established a little more than a hundred years ago) and the Congregation of the Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic (officially recognized by Rome in 1920)². Originally dependent, structurally and economically, on the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, MKLM today is operated separately and depends on its own funding. (In a second article we will discover the missionaries themselves, how they work, the people with whom they work, etc.) Before going into the history of MKLM, which tells us much about the challenges that confront other lay missionary movements in the United States, and in other parts of the world, it will be useful to try to define what a “lay missionary” is.

The meaning of the word “lay”

¹ Legal mention: Maryknoll Lay Missioners (MKLM) is a Catholic organization that works with poor communities in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America, making improvements in civil and human rights, and educational, economic, environmental, and healthcare development. Although we collaborate in our mission work, MKLM is operated and funded separately from Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers and Maryknoll Sisters. To learn more about MKLM, please call 1.800.867.2980, or visit www.mkmlm.org. Donations or written inquiries are welcomed at: Maryknoll Lay Missioners, P.O. Box 307, Maryknoll, N.Y. 10545-0307.

² See the shared website of MKLM, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers and the Maryknoll Sisters: <http://www.maryknoll.org/home/>

The meaning of the expression “lay missionary” may seem evident to almost everyone. But if all the people reading this article had to put on paper their definition of this term before reading further, the number of different definitions would probably be very close to the number of readers. This is because the expression contains two words, both of which can be very ambiguous. We can start with the word “layperson” or “laity”. The most commonly consulted dictionaries are quite clear. According to the *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, for example, a “layperson” is someone “who is not a clergyman” and the adjective “lay” means “of or relating to the laity: not ecclesiastical; of or relating to members of a religious house occupied with domestic or manual work (a lay brother)”. As for the word “laity”, it designates “the people of a religious faith as distinguished from its clergy”. The chapter on the laity in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* narrows down this definition somewhat: “The term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church” (LG 31).

The description of the laity given by the Fathers of Vatican II is much more pastoral than the clear distinction between laity and clergy that we find in canon law and which is closer to the definition in the dictionary mentioned above. This explains perhaps the importance of the word “here” in the text of *Lumen Gentium*. Here is what canon 207 says:

By divine institution, there are among the Christian faithful in the Church sacred ministers who in law are also called clerics; the other members of the Christian faithful are called laypersons.

There are members of the Christian faithful from both these groups who, through the profession of the evangelical counsels by means of vows or other sacred bonds recognized and sanctioned by the Church, are consecrated to God in their own special way and contribute to the salvific mission of the Church; although their state does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church, it nevertheless belongs to its life and holiness. (Can. 207, § 1 et § 2)

This seems to imply that, canonically speaking, men religious who are not ordained (lay brothers) and women religious, who in the Catholic Church are never ordained, are much closer to laypersons than to clerics. The point of all this is to help understand some of the difficulties that all lay movements and lay missionaries, including MKLM and MKLM missionaries, have had to face during the past decades are similar to those that lay brothers and women religious have had to face for centuries. They are all very conscious of the fact that, at the practical level, real authority in the Church seems to be inseparable from the sacrament of holy orders. This explains why a lay brother cannot be named superior general of his order (unless it is an order of lay brothers) and a woman religious, even though she can obviously be the superior of her congregation, cannot exercise authority at other levels in the Church. It’s almost as if it would be unthinkable to have ordained priests under the authority of an unordained man or a woman. This was not the case in the Middle Ages during which certain Mother Abbesses, for example, exercised considerable authority over all those who were under her jurisdiction, including priests. We will see that this question of authority partly explains the structural evolution of MKLM over the years.

The meaning of the word “missioner”

For anyone who is familiar with Vatican II it is clear that all lay people are missionaries because every baptized Christian is called to take part in the missionary activity of the Church. *The Decree Ad Gentes on the Missionary activity of the Church* could not be clearer on this point. In chapter six, entitled “Cooperation”, *Ad Gentes* tells us:

Since the whole Church is missionary, and the work of evangelization is a basic duty of the People of God, this sacred synod invites all to a deep interior renewal; so that, having a vivid awareness of their own responsibility for spreading the Gospel, they may do their share in missionary work among the nations.

As members of the living Christ, incorporated into Him and made like unto Him through baptism and through confirmation and the Eucharist, all the faithful are duty-bound to cooperate in the expansion and spreading out of His Body, to bring it to fullness as soon as may be (Eph. 4:13). (AG 35-36)

This reiterates what *Lumen Gentium* had already affirmed about the place of the laity in mission:

These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ: and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world. (LG, 31)

In the past, the words missioner (or missionary) and mission were closely associated with the commitment of ordained priests and men and women religious, who responded to the call to leave their homes and their homelands to spend their entire lives (cf. AG 24) serving God and the Church by announcing the Good News of Jesus Christ to those who had yet heard it, establishing Christian communities there where there were none and helping newly established Churches grow. Given the difficulties of the work (long and sometimes dangerous voyages, the acquisition of language skills, the need for mobility, health and economic issues, etc.), in the past there was little place in “mission lands” for lay men and women (such as they are described in *Lumen Gentium* 31) coming from far away, especially if these men and women were married and had a family to care for.

Times have obviously changed! There are fewer peoples who have never heard of Jesus Christ and fewer regions where there are no Christian communities. It is easier to travel to most parts of the world and there generally are fewer health issues. Economic restraints are always an issue, but they are not overwhelming. There is also a greater need of skills for which priests and religious are not trained. And certain laypersons have acquired skills that in the past were naturally associated with the role of priests and religious in mission (theological knowledge, organizational skills, etc.). There is also the growing awareness that every parish, every diocese, every local Church has to go beyond its “natural” boundaries to fulfill its commitment to the universal call to mission that comes with being incorporated by Baptism into the Body of Christ, into the People of God (on this point see AG 37). Lastly, though today lifetime commitment will always be necessary for a certain number of missionaries, the collaboration of lay missionaries who commit themselves to active mission work for shorter periods of time (several years, for example) should be encouraged. Such lay missionaries, with their skills (and charisma), with their experience, and perhaps especially with that of having a family and of being engaged in the world, have much to give in mission. This is true because by their lives and by their way of being with the people they serve they witness to what is absolutely essential in the Gospel. And though it may be true that religious “by their state in life, give splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transformed and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes” (LG 31) lay missionaries know that “to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God” (the characteristic of lay people according to LG 31) is not to be contrasted with what religious missionaries are called to live. They are deeply aware of their calling to show that Christians can and do engage in temporal affairs in the spirit of the beatitudes. And this is an essential aspect of all missionary activity. When lay missionaries are sent by one particular Church to another particular Church in a different cultural milieu, they bring with them the

day to day experience of what living the faith in a given context – and in the spirit of the beatitudes – can mean. And when, after a few years, they return, they bring with them what they learned from the people whom they served, thus contributing to the ongoing renewal of their own Church. Repeating this exchange several times is an absolute necessity in mission today. And it should not be difficult to see how this style of “short-term” mission, constantly renewed, can in fact easily become “long-term” mission, even “life-long” mission.

The example of Maryknoll Lay Missioners

Everything we have seen up to now will become much clearer as we reflect upon the experience of Maryknoll Lay Missioners whose origins go back to 1972, and even before. To help understand the importance of MKLM it is important to know that it is the largest lay Catholic missionary sending organization in the United States. It has prepared and sent more than 700 men and women as missioners to more than 36 countries and its international training program is recognized as a model by other catholic mission organizations. MKLM describes itself as a Catholic organization inspired by the mission of Jesus to work in poor communities in Africa, Asia and the Americas. MKLM missioners state their intention to promote justice, peace and fullness of life; to care for the sick, comfort the afflicted and support the poor and the marginalized; to collaborate in the work of creating sustainable social, educational, healthcare and economic change for those in need around the world; to work with others for structural changes that will bring about a more just and compassionate society. For those who might be tempted to think that MKLM looks more like a Non-governmental Organization than a Catholic missionary sending organization, it would be good to meditate on what the Council Fathers stated in their *Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church* concerning the collaboration of lay missioners:

Laymen cooperate in the Church’s work of evangelization; as witnesses and at the same time as living instruments, they share in her saving mission; (...)

In mission lands, let laymen, whether foreigners or autochthonous, teach in schools, administer temporal goods cooperate in parish and diocesan activities, and organize and promote various forms of the lay apostolate, in order that the faithful of the young churches may be able to take part as soon as possible in the life of the Church.

Lastly, let laymen gladly offer socio-economic cooperation to peoples on the way of development. This cooperation is all the more to be praised, the more it concerns itself with founding institutes which touch on the basic structures of social life, or which are oriented to the training of those who bear the responsibility for the government. (...)

They should cooperate in a brotherly spirit with other Christians, with non-Christians, and with members of international organizations, always having before their eyes the fact that “the building up of the earthly city should have its foundation in the Lord, and should be directed towards Him.” (AG 41)

Everything MKLM says of its own vision of mission reflects in one way or another what we can find in *Ad Gentes*. (The excerpts from the mission vision of MKLM missioners presented in the annex at the end of this article show very clearly how their commitment and work are rooted in the mission of the Church.)

***The origins of MKLM*³**

³ The information concerning the origins and the evolution of MKLM is based on the Maryknoll mission archives: cf. <http://www.maryknollmissionarchives.com> or <http://maryknollmissionarchives.org/>

In 1972 the The Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America (Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers) authorized an experimental lay missionary program for the first time, sending lay missionaries to work with Maryknoll fathers and sisters in Hong Kong and Peru. But these were not the first lay missionaries to work with Maryknoll. During the first 60 years of Maryknoll's existence there were a few examples of laity serving with Maryknoll in mission territories. The first Maryknoll lay missionary, a doctor, went to China where he worked for seven years. There he opened a hospital and returned to the U.S. after completing his contract and married. He then returned to China with his newly wedded wife. After the birth of their child he went back to the United States with his family because of the family's difficulty in adapting to mission life and the climate. In spite of this aborted attempt to live a long-term commitment to mission, such as mission was understood at that time, this experience laid the groundwork, for what would become the Maryknoll Mission Association of the Faithful. Another lay missionary, a doctor who worked in China a few years with the first lay missionary and then went on to work in Korea (1955-1965) actually became the first long-term Maryknoll lay missionary. He married and found that family life was not at all incompatible with mission. A few others followed this example, but there was no organized program.

With the new awareness of the implications of the sacrament of Baptism, the changing situation of conditions overseas and the growing need of certain skills that lay missionaries could offer, the importance of creating the first experimental lay missionary program mentioned above became evident. The core preparation for the lay missionaries during this period was provided by the Maryknoll Sister's Mission Institute. The missionaries signed formal written agreements co-signed by the superior general of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers and the Treasurer and President of the Maryknoll Sisters. The results of this experiment were encouraging and in 1975 Maryknoll founded the Lay Mission Office, under the direction of a Maryknoll priest, soon to be assisted by a Maryknoll sister, the two functioning, in practice, as co-directors. The newly founded Office began the first formal orientation program for lay missionaries who soon would be serving in Korea, Bolivia, Tanzania, Kenya and Japan. The year 1975, considered as the founding year of MKLM missionaries, also saw the first joint sending ceremony (Maryknoll fathers and brothers, and Maryknoll lay missionaries). In the late 70s and 80s MKLM developed rapidly. In 1978 there were 90 lay missionaries working not only in the countries already mentioned but also to Nicaragua and the Philippines. In the following years MKLM would also be serving in Thailand, Ecuador, the Honduras... and by 1992, in 17 countries, including the United States.

The structural evolution of the Maryknoll Lay Missioner Program

What we saw above in the brief presentation of the meaning of the terms "lay" and "missioner" will help us better understand how the Maryknoll Lay Missioner Program evolved structurally in the four decades following the first experimental program in 1972. Here we will limit ourselves to the most important steps of this evolution (others can be found on the MKLM website⁴).

Our starting point will be the evolution of the structure of the Lay Mission Office founded in 1975. We already saw that the director of this office was a Maryknoll priest (a cleric). A Maryknoll sister was then named assistant director, the two functioning as co-directors of the Office. One year later, a lay missionary was also appointed as assistant director and the three functioned as an ecclesial team of co-directors. The Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers

⁴ <http://www.maryknolllaymissioners.org/>

reaffirmed their commitment to the Lay Mission Program in their Seventh General Chapter (1978), as did the Maryknoll Sisters in their Eleventh General Assembly (also in 1978). The Maryknoll Sisters however asked the General Council of the Maryknoll Fathers to clarify the responsibilities that each of these two entities had in the on-going Lay Mission Program. In 1979, the General Council decided to replace the ecclesial team of three co-directors with a lay team of three persons – a coordinator and two staff persons responsible respectively for formation and for personnel. In this new configuration, the signature of the President of the Maryknoll Sisters Congregation was no longer required for Lay missioner covenants and in 1981 the Maryknoll Sisters Leadership Team officially described their relationship with the Maryknoll Lay Missioner Program as one of “cooperation” with policies, the responsibility for the Program belonging to the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers.

In 1984, the Eighth General Chapter of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers decided to make the Lay Missioner Program an Associate Program of the Society, adopting the term “Associate Lay Missioner”. The rapid growth and vitality of the Lay Missioner Program in the 80s was discussed during the 1990 Chapter of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, which petitioned the Vatican to include lay missioners in the Society Constitution. The petition was denied but Rome recognized the commitment of lay missioners and the importance of their work, asking that separate structures be established for them. This led to the creation of a committee consisting of Maryknoll Lay Missioners, Priests and Sisters who together reflected on how to found a new mission association that would have a separate civic and canonical structure. This new association was founded on August 15, 1994. At the founding assembly (1-14 August), the new statutes were ratified by delegates, leadership was elected and the name, Maryknoll Mission Association of the Faithful was chosen. In spite of the impression that the popular name of the Association (Maryknoll Lay Missioners) approved by the Third General Assembly of MKLM in 2003 may give, this Association, though primarily comprised of lay people, can welcome clergy and religious as full members if they have the permission of their superior or bishop. The official recognition by the Pontifical Council for the Laity continues in process while the Maryknoll Society of Fathers and Brothers is under the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

MKLM today

As any organization striving to establish itself in a very rapidly changing world, MKLM continued to modify its structures, at regional and central administrative levels. Today, a fourteen member Board of Directors, each member having broad experience in mission, non-profit and religious organizations, has fiduciary responsibility for the Association and gives general guidance to MKLM. At the operational level, MKLM has an Executive Director and a Director of Missions, both of whom are missioners with long term experience in mission and are committed to providing accountability to the MKLM missioners, to the people with whom MKLM works and to benefactors. Each region (countries where the Association works) is guided locally by a Regional Coordinator. The Executive Director is responsible for the organization's overall direction setting, planning, and evaluation of global operations. The Director of Missions works closely with the Regional Coordinators in the countries where MKLM serves, oversees the Mission Service Department (in New York), which has the responsibility for the recruitment, selection and training of missioners, accompaniment of returned missioners and various domestic and overseas mission education programs. Each year there is a Mission Assembly – meeting of the Executive Director, the Director of Missions and the Regional Coordinators, who bring the voices of the regions’ members to the

global council and to this Assembly, – to review statutes and the charisma of the Association. Non-governance statutes can be modified by this gathering.

MKLM did not escape the 2008 international economic crisis unscathed and had to fully review and evaluate its organization. In this process, MKLM, which had become financially independent from the The Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America (Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers), had to make some painful decisions. Basically they had to decide how many and which regions (countries where the MKLM missionaries serve) they could sustain. After the necessary consolidation six regions remained: El Salvador, Bolivia and Brazil in Latin America, Cambodia in Asia and Tanzania and Kenya in East Africa. In principle, MKLM aims to maintain at least ten lay missionaries in each of these regions. But who are these lay missionaries, how are they prepared, what do they do, and with whom do they work? The answers to these and other questions are in the next article.

ANNEXE: the MKLM mission vision

“We are a lay Catholic community called through baptism to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, crossing boundaries of culture, nationality and faith to join our lives with impoverished and oppressed peoples of the earth. With them, we discern the presence of God’s Spirit in all creation and in the world’s many cultures and religions, and work toward human liberation and inter-religious dialogue in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

(...)

We are nourished by God’s revelation in the world around us, in our relationships, and in the Scriptures, as well as by our communal reflection, prayer and Eucharist. We are inspired by the rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching, and we are grounded in the history and spirit of our Maryknoll mission family. Believing that all people are called to mission, we actively promote the role of laity in global mission while committing ourselves to share this journey in ecclesial teams of priests, sisters, brothers and laity.

We challenge unjust structures and systems, seeking transformation of the very powers that create and benefit from the marginalization of communities, and we commit to becoming a dynamic anti-racist organization that reflects the ethnic and cultural richness of the US Catholic Church and the world in this millennium.

The life of Jesus compels us to love one another and to create a more just and compassionate world. Even amidst sin, suffering and death, we celebrate the holiness of everyday life and we proclaim the hope of resurrection.

We are grateful to the communities who send us, to the people who receive us, and to those whose support makes our work possible. We commit ourselves to accountability to each other, the people with whom we work, and our benefactors⁵.”

⁵ Cf. the factsheet on the MKLM website:

<http://www.maryknoll-laymissioners.org/maryknoll-laymissioners/images/pdf/factsheet.pdf>