



ENCOUNTER

Catholic laity on mission – everywhere

April 2020

Welcome to Encounter!

What does mission look like in a time of isolation? The temptation is to think that mission, and many other aspects of life, is currently on a pandemic pause. While resources, travel, and social interaction are limited, missionary-disciples must do the most we can with what we have. Who can we call with a kind message? An elderly neighbor, an anxious coworker, a lonely friend, or a new friend? Who can we pray with? Dr. Hunter Farrell reminds us that mission starts from the ground up, with sharing the Good News with those on the margins. Some do this in direct ways, like Scarlet Sandoval providing dental care to people living in poverty in South and Central America; others offer prayers and financial support to help those experiencing the biggest setbacks from the pandemic. Our efforts do not go unnoticed. Be strong in the Lord and persevere. [#CatholicCares](#). The Church is not closed – it's on mission!

On a Mission to Care for the Smile, and the Soul

Deciding what to do with the four weeks of annual leave Susana Scarlet Sandoval earns in her job as a dental assistant hasn't been a problem since 2016. That's when she founded Healthy Teeth Journey of Hope and dedicated herself to providing dental care to the poor in Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and her home country of Guatemala.

Becoming a regular missionary was the furthest thing from her mind when she went on a trip with Helping Hands Medical Missions about a dozen years ago. She didn't learn until they'd arrived in Guatemala that they didn't also provide dental services.

"I realized that the medical is wonderful, but a lot of people were asking do we have any dentists there?" she recalled. She hadn't brought any of her tools with her and couldn't give the additional care that the people needed. It started her thinking about how she could use her skills and talents, as well as her deep Catholic faith, to give back some of the good fortune she's experienced since coming to the United States half a lifetime ago.



The following year, Scarlet joined them again, but this time with her dental equipment. As a dental assistant, she's able to provide cleanings and instructions about good dental hygiene but can't do extractions. For that, she needed a dentist, so she brought one with her the next time. And she noticed something.

“A lot of the people also come for spiritual health. So I decided to pray with them during the missions, and I discovered they feel better after we pray,” she said. They asked her for rosaries and holy cards, but she didn’t have any. “I said when I come back next year, I will bring those things. I became inspired to do posters with pictures of the Blessed Mother, the Holy Family and the Lord. And I brought a Bible.”

After that, Scarlet decided to try a mission of her own. She began small, just herself, providing dental cleanings at orphanages and little villages. Friends made donations, and two churches near her home in Virginia began to do the same.

At the same time, Scarlet became friendly with a patient at the dental office where she works, and she helped Scarlet fill out the paperwork to become a recognized charity. The money she receives from donors covers the cost of her airline tickets and supplies. Sometimes she brings eyeglasses, as well, for adults who need corrective eyewear, and shoes for children in the orphanages she visits.

Each mission lasts one week, and she goes four times every year. She enlists the aid of a local dentist in each of the communities and engages in prayer and worship with the people she serves.

“I feel like if I’m still healthy and I can do these missions, I want to help.”

“It’s very hard for me to explain, but I love the poor. I always feel so attached to the poor, especially the children,” Scarlet said. “I feel like if I’m still healthy and I can do these missions, I want to help. Because I feel like they are a part of my life.”

Before she came to the United States, Scarlet was a nurse. Thinking it would be easy to transfer those skills to a job in the U.S., she followed her now ex-husband far from the only home she’d ever known. The reality, she soon understood, was quite different. She’d have to learn English first, and then take two more years of classes to become certified.

“I was very sad, because if I knew, I would never have come here,” she said.

And then she got a toothache, which led her to the dental practice of Drs. Joe Cusumano and David Stuver. She became a regular patient, and then the nanny to Dr. Cusumano’s children. Six months later, he urged her to study to become a dental assistant. She’s now worked for them for 20 years, and hopes to be joined by Dr. Stuver, who serves on her board, this coming fall on a mission to a new site in Tijuana.

One of the hygienists from their office has already gone on a mission trip with Scarlet, as has that hygienist’s sister, who is a nurse. Her Easter trip to Peru has been indefinitely postponed, to her disappointment, because of the coronavirus pandemic.

“She’s a special person. A very giving person,” said David. “She’s a true believer in helping others and has said she was given a gift herself, coming to this country from Guatemala, not speaking English, and having no job. It’s now grown to beyond just dental care, to vision and shoes. And she spreads the message of Christ. It’s really great.”

For Scarlet, who has one adult son who also lives in the U.S., it’s all a matter of figuring out what you’re meant to do with what you’ve been given.

“I think the Lord has a purpose for me,” she said. “I truly believe that.”



Visit <https://www.healthyteethjob.com/> for more information about Healthy Teeth Journey of Hope.

Article by Julie Bourbon,
ENCOUNTER Editor

Decolonizing Mission

By Rev. B Hunter Farrell

If you've ever refinished an old but beautiful wooden table, you know what hard work it can be—but how great the reward is! It takes time, dedication, and elbow grease, but if you persevere in stripping away the aged, distorting layers of varnish, you will see the beauty of the creator's original intention.

In a similar manner, I believe that successive eras of history distort our understanding of the *missio Dei*, God's mission to the world. In fact, if we divided up the history of the Church in mission into three major segments, we would see that from the time of the persecution and scattering of the Early Church in Acts 8 in the first century C.E. until roughly the early 4th century, the Good News of Jesus Christ was carried primarily by refugees, migrants, and persecuted Christians. When these "Christ-bearers" arrived in a new community as refugees, they found that, as foreigners, they were often at the bottom of the social hierarchy. But they "ministered from the margins" in the way of the One who washed his disciples' feet and, according to tradition, God's Word was thus introduced throughout the known world from Spain (St. James) to Egypt (St. Mark) to India (St. Thomas)¹. In this first era, the Church kneeled to engage in God's mission from the position of a servant.

In the second era of mission history (4th to 15th centuries), the Gospel was transmitted in Europe primarily from the top-down: the chieftains of the Franks, Slavs, Anglo-Saxons, and other tribes were converted (sometimes by military defeat) and then decreed Christianity to be the new religion of their kingdoms. Mass conversions, state-sponsored churches, and, often, coercive mission by the powerful towards the weak were the hallmarks of this era when Christianity advanced to the march of national armies.

Europe's transformation of the world's economy and the global political map was the primary movement in mission history's third era from the late 15th century until the 1960s. Most students of mission recall that the modern missionary movement grew up hand in hand with the colonial movement. In fact, most observers of the period would have had difficulty separating the two: indigenous people saw the missionary priests and evangelists, doctors and educators, as colonial agents.



But as detailed in Willie James Jennings' masterful *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press, 2011), the beginnings of the North Atlantic slave trade and Europe's need to portray colonial mission as noble—to theologically justify the theft of indigenous lands and the trafficking of millions of human beings—also led to the racialization of mission whereby mission was an activity that sought to improve persons of color by making them more like the white colonizers and missionaries. Because, the reasoning went, they spoke "dialects" not languages; they believed in "superstition" rather than religion; they were "primitive," and we were civilized. The blatant ethnocentrism and nascent assumptions of white supremacy, Jennings argues, begin here in the era of European colonial mission.

Mission in the way of Jesus Christ is best engaged in from the kneeling position as servants. It flows most naturally from below - as mission from the margins of society.

At its best, of course, colonial mission extended the church of Jesus Christ by placing highly dedicated Western missionaries in communities across the global South where their shared life together transformed all of them and sowed the seeds of the multicultural, polyglot movement that is global Christianity today. But at its worst, mission in the colonial era not only flowed hierarchically from the top down, from colonizer to colonial subject, it sowed other seeds as well—racist assumptions about who knows best in discerning God's mission.

¹ Mission historian Jehu Hanciles lifts up the role of migrants and refugees in transmitting the Gospel in his book, [*Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration and the Transformation of the West*](#) (Orbis Press, 2008).

How can we see the beauty of the Creator's original intention in reaching out in love and mercy to fallen humanity? An urgent task of mission today is to strip away the many layers of varnish that have accumulated over the centuries of mission history and that distort our view of God's mission. Because mission in the way of Jesus Christ is best engaged in from the kneeling position as servants. It flows most naturally from below—as mission from the margins of society.

Any missionary will attest to two truths. First, that it was when they were at their weakest that they saw God move most powerfully. And second, that God's mission is profoundly mutual: most missionaries say they were blessed much more by the people they were sent to help

than any good they might have done. Yet these missional realities can be hidden by the distorting colonial narrative that foregrounds the Western missionary, upstaging the God of Love. It is imperative that we restore the lost beauty of God's surprising, bottom-up mission. This is the task of decolonizing mission today.

Hunter Farrell is the Director of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's World Mission Initiative and has worked as a missionary and leader of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in DR Congo, Peru and the U.S. for 30 years.



Mission Profile

Fund for the Disabled in Nicaragua Managua, Nicaragua



For more on their work and current needs, click [here](#).



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- **Books for Review** | USCMA receives complimentary books about missiology, theology, and spirituality for review. Our feature book is *The Radical Gospel of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton by Peter Feuerherd*. For this book or a current listing, [email](#) Nichole Petty, USCMA Office Manager.

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