



# Together in Mission

## ...to Connect and Inspire

‘Meet with Latino Leaders and Police Chief to change racial profiling policy’

local churches and mosques’

‘Plan outreach to schools regarding neighborhood crime with Lutheran church staff’

‘Strategy Meeting with interfaith leaders on upcoming ballot measure to fund homeless shelter’

These are a sampling from my weekly schedule as an interfaith community organizer.

How did I get into this unique form of ministry and what does it have to do with our *charism* as Sisters of St. Joseph?

### ...let us connect, dialogue with each other and establish ties

It started in Brazil. Shortly after making my first vows 26 years ago I discerned about, prepared for and accepted a call to Brazil. For six years as a Junior Professed I lived

and worked with Sisters Claire Lepage and Jeannine Levassuer of the US Province of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Lyon and then with Brazilian Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambéry

#### IN THIS ISSUE

*Living the Charism as a Community Organizer*

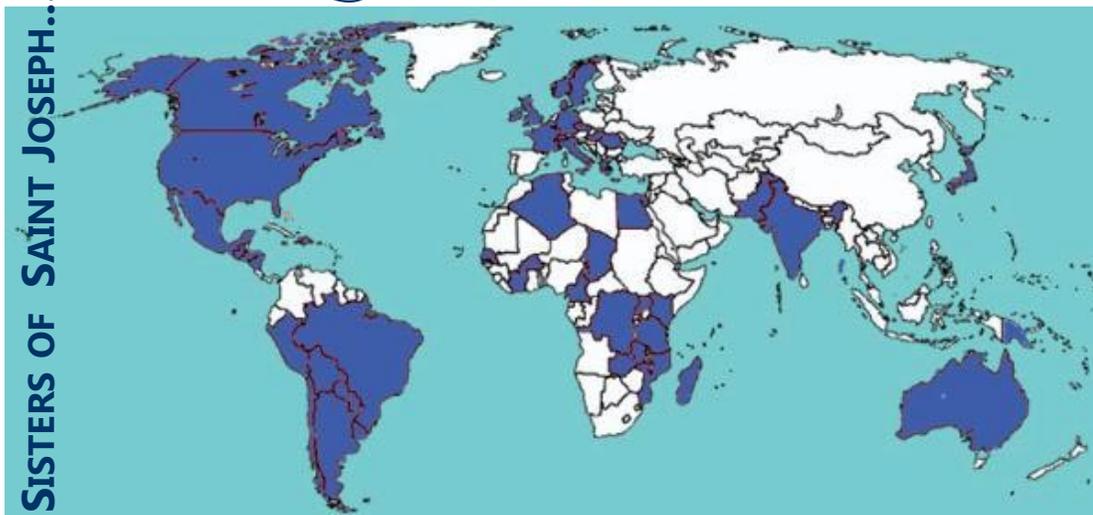
‘Train Muslim Student Association on how to organize to combat Islamophobia’

‘Lunch with Catholic pastors to plan joint parish council meeting on youth gang problems’

‘Staff meeting with organizers to evaluate recent 500-person conference on how the economy is effecting working families’

‘Presentation after Shabbat Services at synagogue on building relationships with

## ...throughout the world.



Graphic designed by Baya Claire, csj/Carondelet-St

You are invited to study this image of our world. The countries shaded in blue indicate where our spirit and mission is alive and active through the presence of Sisters of St. Joseph and Associates who live and minister in these countries.





who welcomed me with great generosity. We served in largely priest-less areas of the impoverished Northeast of the country. Our ministry focused on working with lay leaders to form Base Christian Communities as well as schools of biblical literacy, alternative agriculture and micro-enterprises. My plans for the future were to return to the US one day and continue my education in psychology, perhaps becoming a therapist.

But something happened in Brazil to change that. One night I found myself walking down a dark dirt road at night in our small town, being led to the local jail by an exhausted young man from one of our Base Communities. He had walked and run over 12km to fetch me. I was home alone and it was one of the many nights when the electricity in the town was out so I was wary of leaving the house but he was so insistent and scared looking that I followed him. Ten days earlier we had been to his remote village with our pastoral team. There, we reflected on John 10:10, *'I have come that you may have life and life to the full.'* As we walked, the young man caught his breath and told me what happened after we left his community. Don Carlos, the patriarch of the group, gathered his community and they decided to put that text into action. They were poor sharecroppers and they were going to go to their landlord, a 'good Catholic', and tell him about John 10:10. They told him they couldn't feed their young men on the rations of rice they were allowed but if they could keep one more bag of rice per family, their young would stay and not leave for the big cities where they often fell into vice or were not heard from again. The landlord listened carefully, dismissed them and the next day sent his goons to their village. They confiscated their goats and chickens, burnt their rice fields and threw Don Carlos and his family in the town jail.

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That night on that road, I had a crisis of faith. These good people actually took Jesus' words seriously and tried to act on them! I guess I had never imagined they would do that! Even more disturbing, we had given them no tools or preparation for confronting such brutal power. Perhaps they naively thought their Catholic landlord would help them, and we naively thought they wouldn't take Jesus (or us) seriously.

What took place over the next month was my first experiences of seeing the power of faith institutions in action. I saw the sisters and pastoral team members organize meetings of formerly antagonistic groups where alliances were formed and public pressure was created. Eventually not only was Don Carlos' family released but also the Church, the unions and other non-profits had organized in such a way that it became the catalyst for regional agrarian reform measures. This time with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambéry and their people in Brazil reaffirmed by religious call but changed my professional call; instead of personal change work, I was attracted to this kind of structural change work. I wanted to learn how to put Jesus' words into action in the world so that I would never again lead innocents into jail, but rather into greater freedom. But how?



Two years later I returned to the US to make final vows with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Lyon and go to graduate school. While getting my Masters Degree in Social Work I read about a non-profit organization that for 40 years had been taking the church and other faith institutions seriously as centers of potential community power. Through leadership development and public





action they had successfully helped poor and working class people organize through their congregations to fight injustices and better their communities. A Catholic bishop, a protestant minister and a Jewish social worker in the 'industrial area' of the poor, immigrant, south side of the city of Chicago founded this organization, so it called itself the 'Industrial Areas Foundation'. Today the IAF is the oldest and largest congregation-based leadership development and community organizing effort in the US with about 70 affiliates in the US as well as in Canada, Australia and Great Britain. (One of the more famous alumni of IAF training is President Barak Obama, who was widely ridiculed for his past profession by his opponents while campaigning for office.)

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and formidable: unity  
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While I was in school, we as a US Province of Lyon were also discerning a joint venture with our Mexican Province on the US/Mexico border. It fit very well that after graduating, former Provincial Sr. Claudette Poulin and I moved to El Paso, Texas where I began my organizing career with the IAF and we began a relationship with our Mexican sisters along the border.

That was 16 years ago. I organized with the IAF in Texas for 5 years, then in Los Angeles for 5 years and now Sr. Claudette (who teaches English to immigrant mothers) and I have been here in San Francisco Bay Area of northern California for the last 6 years. I currently supervise IAF organizations across 11 counties of northern California and am also working to build organizing efforts in new areas. The organizers I work with are Latino, Asian and Caucasian as well as Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, Jewish and Quaker.

What do organizers do?

- Work with religious congregations to teach or re-teach them their own social traditions (what they believe about their mission in the world)
- Bring together interfaith leaders (protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and others) to build relationships, create trust and talk about the issues that are affecting them
- Teach them the skills of research, critical analysis and public action so they can act together to create change
- Help them to evaluate and reflect on how acting together can help to strengthen their own congregation and their role in the community.



What are some of the accomplishments of this kind of organizing?

- Along the Texas/US border we organized to get elected officials and voters to support investing over \$2 billion to bring water and wastewater services to the impoverished *colonias* where 350,000 people were living without indoor plumbing on the US side alone.
- In areas where poor workers were being exploited we created job-training efforts that have trained and placed nearly 21,000 adults in living wage jobs; jobs which can support a family.
- With growing nativism and anti-foreigner sentiment across the country, we organize with immigrants and their allies to combat anti-immigrant policies and create stronger relationships between recent arrivals and citizens.
- We worked to pass legislation in many states to guarantee health care for poor children.





Most important and long lasting, we work to develop the leadership of people like Ninfa Garza. Mrs. Garza was too shy to even say her name out loud when we first met. After coming to some trainings and getting support from others, this formerly abused wife and now single mother of three was able to powerfully confront the local police chief about the unjust treatment that her sons and their friends were receiving just because they were Latinos. This emboldened other mothers to come forward. Together they will be hosting education sessions with the police to sensitize them about the immigrant community. Changing policies is good, but the change in Mrs. Garza is powerful.

What does this work of community organizing have to do with being a Sister of St. Joseph? Our *charism* is simple and formidable: unity and reconciliation; reweaving the relationships of neighbor with neighbor and neighbor with God. Of course I am drawn to our *charism* because I need and desire it for myself. I don't so much have a *charism* as much as the *charism* has me. Nearly every day I have to overcome my own anti-*charism* tendencies towards isolation, narrow mindedness, and self-interest in order to meet those qualities in our American culture head-on. When we bring differing groups into relationship with each other so that they face their differences and act on their faith together I feel like I am seeing the unity of 'neighbor with neighbor and neighbor with God'. An organizer doesn't do this *for* others but rather teaches people how to organize themselves. In this way, I am challenged to be the '*multiplicateur*' that our founder intended. The culture of organizing and the culture of St. Joseph are a good fit.

So much is at stake. With the world's youth in an uproar over seeing any hope of a secure future dashed on the altar of corrupt money and politics, community organizers try to help people of faith to 'occupy' not just Wall St., but their congregations, neighborhoods, cities and voting precincts so that through their faithful action in the world there may indeed be more 'life, and life to the full'.

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The Global Coordinating Group values the connections that are made within the Global Joseph Family. We continue to be inspired by the examples and stories of Sisters in various aspects of mission, prayer and heart. Whatever our ministry, be it one of action or prayerful support, let us connect, dialogue with each other and establish ties that will support and energize us in our common purpose.

We invite each Sister and Associate on the five continents to read ***Sisters of St. Joseph: Together In Mission***, consider sharing your own story, and participate in the great flow of energy for mission enlivening us still today. -Global Coordinating Group

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