

Missionary Society of St. Columban

U.S. Regional Administration

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RE: U.S. Region Annual Report for GA2024

To all members, lay missionaries, and coworkers of the GA2024,

I came back into the region six years ago from Chile and have been Regional Director for two years. Following are my personal observations of the reality of the U.S. Region and reflections about the future. After my observations, I have attached the material from various departments (coworkers) regarding trends. To begin, the best way to analyze the situation is to review the ageing membership.

In the past year, one member passed away, while another retired to his homeland in Ireland, and one lay missionary left the program. Currently, there are 35 priests and one lay missionary assigned to the region. The age brackets of the priests are:

- Under 60 years: 1
- 60-69 years: 3
- 70+ years: 31

Note that one member lives in St. Columban's Silver Creek retirement home, 14 members live in the Bristol Retirement community, and four members are in a nursing home nearby. This accounts for 54% of the members in the region. Those in active parish ministry are three Columbans who are pastors of parishes, with two Columbans assisting them in a retired or limited capacity. In St. Columbans, Nebraska, the center of fundraising and mission promotion in the region, there are five Columbans, four of which are 80+. The remaining six members are in personal commitments around the country.

Regarding the morale of the region, the members in the Bristol community, although optimistic, experience some anxiety. Questions about how long will the property be in Columban hands as members diminish? Will we move the members to another location? Will the community be split up? Although, they are continually assured of their well-being, having a place to live, and maintaining the community, these anxieties persist. The region will have to develop a plan for the diminishing numbers.

Members involved in parish ministry are enthusiastic and optimistic. There have been creative initiatives such as the LGBTQ+ ministry in St. Mary's of Fontana which is fully supported by the bishop of the diocese. There has been push back in the parish from a small group of people. In fact, three people have communicated their displeasure to the Regional Director's office. However, in a parish of 50,000 people, the majority have supported the ministry or are accepting of its presence.

Australia + Britain + Chile + China + Fiji + Hong Kong + Ireland + Japan + Korea + Mexico
Myanmar + New Zealand + Pakistan + Peru + Philippines + Taiwan + United States

The Columban migrant ministry has grown from the Columban founded parish of Corpus Christi in Anapra, Mexico, into a migrant meal program in the cathedral, and maintaining three shelters throughout the city. The migrant meal program provides daily lunch for about 700 to 1,000 newly arrived migrants. In the past year, most have been from Venezuela. This Columban initiative has been frequently written up in the diocesan newspaper. Also, it has attracted many groups around the U.S. to participate in our Border Awareness Experience (BAE) program.

The JPE office has left Washington D.C. and will establish itself between El Paso and St. Columbans. The region remains fully committed to JPE but has to consider new structures with diminishing resources. This is not uncharacteristic of missionary groups today. The United States Catholic Mission Association has observed that many small missionary groups have pulled their JPE offices out of Washington D.C. due to downsizing, financing, and less personnel. For instance, Maryknoll moved their JPE office to their headquarters in upstate New York. The Maryknoll Lay Mission Program moved to El Paso.

There is a new initiative to restore the Columban Mission Center (CMC) in El Paso to its educative purpose similar to when Fr. Bob Mosher was its director. It was the most popular Columban program in recent years with universities, church groups, ecumenical groups, non-profits, etc., participating in the CMC for Border Awareness Experience and JPE workshops/formation. Many young people participated, internships programs were active, and the CMC received many donations. At its height, in one year, the CMC received \$75,000, more than enough to cover its own expenses. At the time, the center operated about three-fourths of the year. There is a sense of renewal with the plans to re-start the CMC with its programs.

Due to aging personnel, lack of human resources, and no young Columbans being assigned to the region, parish-based ministry is becoming less viable. We have three parishes: two in California, one in Anapra (Mexico). The parish of St. Hilary's of Pico Rivera will be handed over to the diocese on June 30, 2024. Same can be said of St. Mary's of Fontana. Two are assigned but with no foreseeable replacements. Our presence in St. Mary's has a foreseeable end by three years. Corpus Christi in Anapra is being maintained by one Columban in his 70s. If something happens to him, the region has no replacement. Even if an assigned person in the region was willing to help, it would be a very temporary solution because of ageing members. Fortunately, we do not have a contract with the diocese of Juarez to maintain the parish. Therefore, we are not obligated to fill any vacancies. However, the viability of parish-based ministry begs the question, can the region responsibly and consciously enter into an agreement with a diocese to administrate a parish with no long-term continuity? Is there a need to have a "Columban" parish in the U.S. Region?

The region does not intend to commit to any new parishes (at least during my administration) due to the reason stated above. In addition, parishes require investment of time and energy to administer which can have unfortunate consequences such as minimal communication with the wider region and minimal concerns for regional priorities. Not being assigned to a parish is nothing new for Columbans in the region. For decades, many Columbans have supported local parishes with supply work, helping local churches in their pastoral commitments when requested. Through supply work, Columbans have built strong relationships with local clergy and the communities they serve. Other avenues that Columbans have exercised their priestly duties is through non-parish-based ministries such as working in JPE issues (i.e. migrant ministry, CMC programs), social ministry (i.e. volunteer at homeless shelters), and involvement in Catholic movements (i.e. Marriage Encounter, Charismatics). While involved in these

ministries, Columban have promoted the Columban mission. For example, I am involved with the Spanish-speaking Marriage Encounter of the Archdiocese of Omaha, and I give about two retreats a year. After the retreats, as a gift, I give the participating couples a *Columban Mission* magazine and prayer booklets. In short, one does not need a parish to promote the Columban mission.

The U.S. Region is a major fundraising arm of the Columban society. With no young Columbans (and lay missionaries) being assigned to the region, it places tremendous pressure on the youngest Columban in the region to oversee the complex operation of the General Mission Office (GMO) and the coworkers. From a Columban member view, it is becoming a one-man operation. Keep in mind, added to the Regional Director's duties are dealings with litigation of sex abuse allegations, updating Safe Environment protocols, General Council requests and demands, international meetings, etc., that adds to the workload. How long can this last? Will pressure and stress take its toll? Can the Columban society be negligent about unrealistic demands that can affect self-care? There is great assistance with competent coworkers in the office but the need for more Columban members' presence is urgent. Who will be the next generation of Columbans to take on this task? Who will mentor and guide young Columbans in this ministry and how to collaborate with coworkers?

I believe the most urgent need is assigning young Columbans and lay missionaries, preferably with some cross-cultural mission experience, to the region for full-time nationwide fundraising, benefactor visitation, mission appeals, mission promotion, and vocations which has been the original purpose of the U.S. Region. As our traditional base of donors are drying up, I have seen fertile ground in new donor bases with the cultural groups of our missions (Korean, Filipino, Oceania, and Latino). Columbans from these cultural groups will be advantageous to the region. What is needed is a coordinated effort with the General Mission Office to visit communities around the country to offer mission talks, retreats, celebrations, fundraising activities, visitation, and to get our name out there. It is important to stress that this collaborative effort with members, lay missionaries, and coworkers will require strategic planning, team work, and transparency.

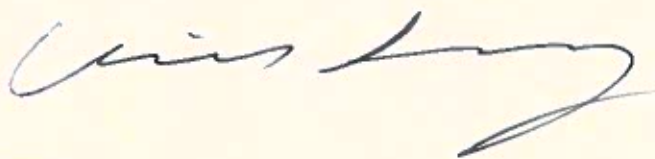
The U.S. Region is not only a fundraising region but, also, a mission region. With the reconfiguration of the JPE office and border ministry in El Paso/Juarez, we need young Columbans and lay missionaries to be engaged in this regional priority. Migrant ministry, advocacy, immersion trips, JPE workshops/seminars, etc. are vibrant ministries that benefit with younger energy to promote the Columban mission across a wide variety of peoples from university students to religious groups to secular groups. Our programs on the border have put us on the map in the mission of the U.S./Mexico church.

Another urgent need is content! We need young Columbans from all RMUs to routinely send new content about their missions via written, audio, or video. One or two stories a year would suffice. If somebody has time to upload videos on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, they can record a two-minute video on their mission. I can't stress the urgency: mission stories (content) are what drives the donor base! Donors want new content. No stories lead to no donations which leads to no funding for our mission projects and Columban life.

If you believe there is a future for the Columban society, there is an urgency to assign young Columbans to the U.S. region. Mentorship is possible with the presence of experienced Columbans. Vocations are still a good possibility in the United States especially amongst the various cultural groups mentioned. Creating new donors will be advantageous to the wider Columban society.

If you believe there is no future for the Columban society, there is an urgency to assign young Columbans to the U.S. region in order to fundraise for retirement, Columban life, and the mission work in the RMUs.

Respectfully submitted,



Fr. Chris Saenz
U.S. Region Director

Addendum: Observable trends according to each regional department

Finance Department:

The U.S. Region is not unlike other RMU's in the Society in that we are seeing lower donation totals and some increasing expenses. While we have made our budgeted amount for surplus amounts since the reduction in expenses mandate, we are now unfortunately seeing that cutting costs in new donor acquisition is costing more than the expense cutting saved. Donations currently to date are at modern time low. A balance of fundraising spending and expense cutting needs to be realized or the Society will cost cut itself out of existence at an accelerated rate. New cost efficient and proven ideas will need to be implemented to attract new donors to slow the depleting overall active benefactor count.

With member ability to actively assist diminishing in fundraising, staff is more and more depended upon for keeping the personal relationship we have with all our active donors. The possibility of using some investment funds for benefactor relationship building should be reviewed and possibly tested.

Retirement costs have been trending lower as less members, but coworker payroll costs continue to increase albeit at a much lower increase. Banking and investment fees seem to be hampering gains in investments as well as the market in general.

We are asking the General Assembly to actively discuss allowing more funding for new donor acquisition ideas along with more content shared by members to share with our benefactors both existing and new.

Communications Department:

The main areas of concern for the communications department, in no particular order, are content, rising production costs/supply chain obstacles, and the declining donor base. The declining donor base isn't specific to only the Columbans. Non-profits in the U.S. (religious and secular) are seeing declining donations.

Content—With a print magazine, a website, e-newsletter, daily e-prayer, weekly e-prayer, marketing and development promotion materials, and social media all in need of content, the communications department is always searching for material to use. While we have been blessed with some faithful

contributors, more Columbans need to provide material. We have been fortunate that the lay missionaries are required to provide two pieces per year, and their contributions are all used.

Production costs/Supply chain obstacles—Costs continue to rise across all categories. Paper, marketing materials, software, e-vendor contract costs and more continue to increase. Coupled with supply chain obstacles, it makes for a very challenging environment that is unlikely to ease in the near future.

Declining donor base—Younger generations don't give at the same rate as older generations, and the older generations are passing away or entering skilled care which takes all of their assets. More and more people are identifying as "non-religious," and the ongoing sexual abuse scandal within the Catholic church continues to erode the traditional donor base.

The mandate to reduce budgets by 30% negatively impacted the work of the US region. At a time when we should have been investing in donor acquisition, we were forced to reduce our acquisition budget. With an already declining donor base, the mix has proved quite detrimental.

However, there are opportunities available. We can increase our electronic outreach with a more secular bent (i.e. a weekly affirmation/reflection rather than a prayer). We can increase our electronic marketing which at this point is still a bit less expensive than direct mail. We should explore acquiring donors who aren't necessarily Catholic or religious. We can and will continue to be good stewards of all finances.

Overview of Development and Mission Promotion – Direct Response (direct mail) and E-Channel Fundraising:

Since the COVID pandemic, understanding donor behaviors and their affinities (likes and dislikes) has grown more elusive and difficult. We know from experience that if we are not attentive to donor expectations and interests, they will never feel appreciated nor will they understand the vital role they have as partners in the mission of Jesus. Fundraising is the fertile ground where fundraising and mission meet. It is where people are invited to put their resources at the disposal of the Kingdom of God. Stories of Columban "mission in action" serve as an invitation and motivates others to action. Without those stories or without an audience to tell them to, the ministry of fundraising will be increasingly less effective. Fewer Columbans engaged in mission translates to fewer compelling stories, which will most certainly result in fewer benefactors. Couple those challenges with a steady decline in the number of active U.S. Catholics, and we will be forced to look elsewhere for prospective supporters of Columban mission. If that is our reality, the stories we tell will need to become more universally appealing. And they will need to be strategically targeted to audiences that are likely and willing to engage with us. The future, and ultimately the financial security of the Society, will hinge on a clear path forward. This is a critically important task of the 2024 General Assembly.

While we are seeing some easing of supply chain issues, costs associated with all goods and services that make up the inputs into our current programs continue to increase consistently. We continue to strive to improve stewardship, accountability, and transparency to all of the stakeholders (Columbans and benefactor alike) by:

- A. Using technology and all forms of electronic communication to reduce input costs and gain new benefactors.
- B. Looking to new groups, like Hispanics, Koreans, and Filipinos to increase our "base" of support.
- C. Seeking out and obtaining competitive alternatives, leveraging our volume to keep our costs within reason.
- D. Using the available data to drive improved decision-making and gain efficiency whenever possible.

We recognize the need to cultivate not only new donors who most likely will not identify as Catholic or even religious but also to cultivate new ways to engage with them. Younger demographics are looking for e-channel (online, social media, text to give, etc.) sources of information as well as donation opportunities. And the younger demographics are looking for younger faces (i.e. the younger Columbans and lay missionaries) to share the story of Columban mission. It is vitally important that the younger members and lay missionaries provide material about their work in order for us to cultivate a younger audience of supporters.

Healthcare Coordinator / Bristol, R.I.:

Currently there are 14 members residing in the Bristol house and 4 members residing at Dawn Hill. One member has expressed that he may be moving to Bristol early next year. The average age of the residents in the Bristol house is 82.7. It is extremely difficult to try and make a medically educated guess on how long any one member will pass away. It has been proven that with good medical care and supervision of this care the members are living much longer.

We have been and will continue to treat the residents in a holistic manner. Addressing their medical concerns as well as their social, mental and spiritual wellbeing.

Funding concerning these needs will remain unchanged. The members have all been established with a comprehensive medical plan that places a cap on the amount of out of pocket expenses. The total cap averages around \$4,000. Most of the members in the U.S have also been enrolled on a very similar plan. To my knowledge not one member has ever reached this yearly cap and the out of pocket expenses have improved significantly. For the members that enter a nursing home, we ask that they spend down their own finances until they reach \$4,000. We then apply for medical assistance through the state. The state will then pay their nursing home payments and the residents will co-pay their social security payment minus \$50.00 monthly. This has also saved a CONSIDERABLE amount of money for the Society.

Part of the holistic approach includes providing outside activities. This has become a bit more challenging due to the age and condition of our residents. These activities have to be tailored to meet these challenges. Some of the members will continue their mission by hearing confessions here in the building, counseling those in need, saying Mass here in the Bristol house, etc. The Bristol house remains a sense of community as some of the younger or less compromised members look out for and are able to assist the others when needed.

The current problem that we are facing but not yet needing that much assistance is with the very few members that are able to drive. The lack of drivers makes the trips to doctors, testing, dentists, etc. more challenging for the nurses.

One potential problem coming in the near future is being able to find a new house superior. Given the average age and availability, this is a growing concern.

Justice, Peace, and Ecology:

In recent years, the work of the Columbans on Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) in the United States has undergone significant changes. This transformation is particularly evident in the activities at the Columban Mission Center in El Paso and the St. Columban Mission for Justice, Peace, and Ecology office, formerly known as the Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach (CCAO), which was based in D.C. Over the past two years, these two ministries have been going through a slow and unsteady integration process. Some of the primary obstacles that this integration work has faced are the same ones that the Society as a whole has been grappling with for decades, and they persist to this day. These challenges include the lack of clear direction from the US regional leadership team and the Society leadership team, as well as a lack of collaboration, transparency, and co-responsibility.

As the St. Columban Mission JPE and the Columban Mission Center continue in this period of transition and reassessment, many opportunities have emerged. These opportunities include the importance of sharing the Columban commitment to JPIC work through various initiatives and the necessity of engaging with youth and young people in mission, as well as expanding formation opportunities for laypeople. This work of a reassessment has also presented potential opportunities to strengthen the presence of Columban mission in the United States and create avenues for cultivating benefactors, supporters, and partners in the mission. It has also reaffirmed the need to highlight the work of the Columbans and intentionally share it in a way that allows Columbans to leave a tangible legacy that can continue to have an impact even if and after the Columbans cease to exist as the Society that we have known until this day. What is needed from the regional and international leadership teams is a collective voice and call to community that acknowledges the past, the present, and realistically plans for the future. It is not enough to say that Columban mission will continue. It is critical to work towards it and be intentional in constructing or reconstructing ministries while providing member and co-workers with the tools to do so. It is also critical to work collaboratively across Columban communities, ministries, priests, lay missionaries, and co-workers to more effectively include all perspectives tap on to skills and experience.

*****End of Report*****