
COLUMBAN LAY MISSIONARY
DISCERNMENT REPORT

MARCH 2023



MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF ST. COLUMBAN

INTRODUCTION

During these past several years Columban Lay Missionaries (CLM) have recognized the reality of our declining numbers and realized that we need to make difficult decisions about whether or not to intentionally phase out lay missionaries (LM) in those Regions and Mission Units (RMU) where we can no longer sustain a viable presence. This reality prompted the participants of the 2020 Columban Lay Missionary (CLM) International Meeting to recommend that *the General Council and CLMCLT will review the current makeup of personnel and determine the reconfiguration of LM assignments and phasing out the CLM presence in some RMUs while keeping in mind our commitment to Partnership among Columbans and to Columban priorities. Participants saw the importance of restructuring CLM in order to strengthen our commitment to Columban mission priorities.*

Against this background, in February 2022, CLMCLT and GC, with the assistance of a facilitator, Paula Sgherza, discussed and planned a discernment process for lay and ordained, which included both a personal and communal dimension. We decided to use Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as the method for this discernment process. We acknowledged that this process would be a major undertaking that would require time and space for serious personal and communal reflection as well as for deep conversations. We also acknowledged that this discernment process would likely have a deep emotional impact on LMs who are committed to cross-cultural mission in a particular RMU and make major sacrifices in their respective ministry sites.

All of this coincided with Pope Francis' initiative of inviting the entire Church to embark on a synodal journey which he envisaged as *a time of listening, dialogue, prayer and discernment and a time of openness to what the Spirit is saying to the Church.*

THE PROCESS

The AI discernment process called on all the participants to look beyond their own RMU in order to explore new ways of CLM becoming more effective, more sustainable, and a more authentic witness to the universal church in our globalized world.

Therefore, instead of the usual consultation process involving the formation of a committee and consultative questions, we envisioned a broader communal reflection and conversation for lay missionaries and ordained, which would generally take place within RMUs, but would encompass the bigger CLM picture and the larger CLM vision.

Paula Sgherza – together with Jamie Sgherza, who looked after the technical aspects – conducted an online facilitation training program for five (5) LMs including the 2 members of the CLT. This program was comprised of two training sessions – the first session which dealt

with the *Discernment, Discover, and Dream* phases was conducted in July 2022, and the second session which dealt with the *Design* phase was conducted in November. A CLM Discernment Website was created in order to provide easy access to all the relevant materials and documents, to enhance engagement and conversation, and to assist the LM facilitators in their RMU/RMU group facilitation. The website had a special page for LMs and ordained to guide them in their personal reflections.

Since CLT believed that the small number of LMs in several RMUs would greatly limit the breadth and depth of reflection and conversation, we proposed that LMs in those RMUs would collaborate in the communal discernment process with LMs in other RMUs. Therefore, LMs in Britain, Ireland and US formed one group, while LMs in Korea, Myanmar, Oceania and Pakistan formed another group. The LMs in the Philippines and Taiwan engaged the discernment process within their respective RMU. Members of the LMLT in each RMU were invited to participate with the LMs in the discernment process. Most of the discernment conversations were done online. The feedback from all the sessions was submitted through a google form. All LMs and LMLT members participated in the CLM Discernment in their respective RMU/RMU Group.

All the ordained were invited to participate in this discernment process. Two online sessions were carried out specifically for them. The first session which dealt with the Discover and Dream phase was conducted in October 2022, and the second session which dealt with the Design Phase was conducted in January 2023.

The entire CLM discernment process was carried out over a period of 7 months – from July 2022 to February 2023.

PERSONNEL TRENDS

In 2008, 15 years ago, there were 68 LMs assigned in 10 RMUs. 10 years later, in 2018 there were 51 LMs. Two years later – at the height of the pandemic in July 2020 – there were 44 LMs. Currently, we have a total of 29 LMs, 27 of whom are assigned across 9 RMUs with 2 on the Central Leadership team in Hong Kong. Four RMUs – Ireland, US, Pakistan and Oceania – have just 1 LM.

The fact that several LMs left CLM during these past two and a half years is not something new. Prior to the completion of their term, LMs undergo a personal and communal discernment process as to whether or not to continue with their commitment to Columban mission. However, the pandemic may have had an impact on the discernment process for some LMs as they wrestled with prolonged isolation from family and friends; physical and emotional fatigue; or the necessity of supporting their family through economic hardships.

The visible impact of the pandemic on the number of LMs becomes much more evident when one realizes that there has been no orientation program during these past three years. The Joint Sending Orientation Program in Fiji was the last occasion that CLM received new members. During that orientation program, the pandemic struck, making us quickly realize that we had no choice but to suspend vocation promotion, accompaniment and future orientation programs. While Korea continued to have a 'Come and See' Program during the pandemic, plans to start an orientation program were derailed due to so much uncertainty about what the future held. However, as the covid situation improved, some of the potential candidates lost interest in CLM. Moreover, since 2019 the Philippines has been unable to form a team that could host an orientation program.

Traditionally, LMs were sent out in teams of two or more. We value the companionship of other LMs on our missionary journey – we can learn from one another, as well as support and encourage each other, particularly as we struggle to adapt to another culture, find a ministry site, and discover our missionary identity. Therefore, the absence of peer support and challenge is a deprivation for those LMs who are on their own in a particular RMU, as well as for the wider CLM.

KEY AREAS THAT EMERGED FROM THE AI DISCERNMENT PROCESS CONCERNING CLM SUSTAINABILITY

Regular gatherings or meetings to strengthen connections, support and encouragement was prominently referenced in the feedback. Regular gatherings or meetings also provide opportunities for mentoring and the sharing of skills and resources. They enhance communication and engagement with Columban priorities. Such gatherings or meetings can be done through online platforms or face-to-face.

Ongoing studies/upskilling of LMs for their ministries, leadership skills and other competencies in the service of mission.

Leadership in RMUs and in the wider CLM. Encouragement and mentoring, as well as acquiring leadership skills through courses in order for LMs to develop the confidence and ability to take on responsibilities and leadership is vital.

JPIC and IRD remain at the forefront of our mission. Continuing to place a strong emphasis on these priorities during the orientation program for new LMs and for LMs who are given a new assignment.

Maximize the use of online platforms with regard to all aspects of CLM – mission awareness, vocation promotion, accompaniment, orientation program, gatherings/meetings, support structure.

A **Joint Sending Orientation Program (JSOP)** in the Philippines facilitated by a team of personnel rather than one person.

Strengthen the LM presence in a few RMUs. Re-assign those LMs who are in an RMU by themselves. Consider the amalgamation of CLM in Ireland and Britain.

Provide, revamp, strengthen personnel for vocation promotion. Review and update materials and resources while making greater use of various online platforms to reach out to young people.

Explore other ways of invitation to CLM. To review recruitment, acceptance requirements, and the number available for mission service. To explore the possibility of local mission.

Review and revise the CLM Policy Handbook for long-term LMs.

SOME QUESTIONS THAT WE NEED TO ADDRESS

The following critical questions, which arise in the feedback from our discernment conversations, resonate with the CLT because we have had to grapple with them frequently in our leadership role during these past 4 years.

With the current number, make up, and distribution of personnel, is the current CLM structure sustainable?

How can we maintain personnel for existing roles e.g., CLT, CLM Coordinators/Contact Persons, Mission Awareness and Vocation Promotion with our present number of personnel?

What kind of structure will enhance identity, collaboration, maintain connection and a sense of community among all LMs in the service of mission?

Since the majority of LMs are long-term, how can we better support them?

Is CLM what the present world wants and needs? What is the value of cross-cultural mission in today's world?

What can we offer to the world?

Where does CLM want to focus our energy at this time?

Why are some capable and experienced LMs reluctant to assume greater responsibility and leadership roles?

We affirm that LMs find satisfaction and fulfillment in hands-on ministries – however, are we willing to step back from our ministry sites in order to take care of CLM organizational matters and view that as a valuable contribution to mission?

Are there underlying reasons for LMs leaving CLM?

Why are we not attracting vocations?

Is the diminishment in the number of applicants due to the length of preparation and the length of commitment? Is it time to consider a change of the age requirement and the length of term?

RECOMMENDATION

Rather than trying to replicate a nostalgic past, we are called to step out into an uncertain future. We must recognize that, given the ongoing decline in the number of LMs and the reluctance of many to assume leadership roles within CLM, we cannot continue with our present structure. Focusing on a few key areas in a smaller number of RMUs might make CLM more sustainable for the short-term future. However, in his prophetic message to the Roman Curia in 2019, Pope Francis said we are living: *“not in an era of change, but in a change of era”*. The seismic change that the world is currently undergoing has major implications for the Church, for Columban mission and for LMs. Tinkering with issues at the edge and incremental change will no longer suffice – something much more bolder is demanded. To be able to deepen our commitment to God’s mission and to live out our CLM vision and values, we must be able to move through a major transition in order to respond to the emerging future. In a radically changed world, there is an urgent need to dream a different future if we wish to remain faithful to our calling.

Therefore, in order to address these deeper challenges facing CLM and at the same time attend to the key points and questions that emerged from our personal and communal discernment process, CLT recommends:

1. A review and renewal of current CLM structures so that they nurture connection and community spirit, and foster collaboration in the service of deeper engagement in JPIC and IRD. This will require robust conversations around the vision and priorities of CLM as well as the re-assignment of personnel.
2. Suspend LM Vocation Promotion, Accompaniment, Come and See and Orientation Programs for 5 years. Since the restructuring of the current CLM and the revisioning of its future will take considerable time and energy, it is vital to focus our limited energies on these two areas. This decision will be reviewed, and a report that includes proposals will be presented at the 2029 CLM International Meeting.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the CLM discernment process was to share our experiences and wisdom in a reflective way – that engaged the head, heart and will – in order to come to a deeper personal

and communal understanding of current realities as well as future challenges and opportunities. The fruit of all those reflections and conversations has led CLT to conclude that CLM is called to spend the next few years in the wilderness in order to discern more deeply our calling and our future. Like the Hebrew people and Jesus, we envisage this wilderness as a space to deepen our self-understanding and vocation.

CLT sees the importance of research before the CLM International Meeting later this year. We will therefore contact other organizations and groups to learn about their experience of restructuring and the suspension of vocations/formation programs.

We thank our lay missionaries and the ordained for your commitment to journey together throughout the discernment period. That synodal exercise has made all of us realize that this is indeed the way into the future. We are at a moment in our history where we are invited to venture into uncharted territories. However, as we walk together and talk to one another, we trust that the Spirit will guide us on our personal and communal journey. As cross-cultural missionaries we already know what is asked of us is to walk together, not by sight, but by faith.

FEEDBACK

Kindly click the link to read the collated feedback.

[DISCOVERY.pdf](#)

[DREAM.pdf](#)

[DESIGN.pdf](#)

WEBSITE

Kindly click the website for reference. This website will be shut down by 30 April 2023.

[THE CALL | My Site 1 \(justjoysite.wixsite.com\)](#)