

New CCI parish coordinator brings world of experience

By Michael Brown
Editor

BOISE—For 37 years, Christine Smith has been moving around and bringing with her a sense of urgency and mission. On June 16, Smith began a job as Parish and Community Partnership Coordinator for Catholic Charities of Idaho with the intention to be here awhile.

"This is still frontier, still mission area," said the daughter of a Navy officer, and who spent three years as a missionary in Taiwan. "There is so much potential here."

Smith has pursued life with a missionary zeal, having spent the last three years at Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' international development and relief agency, as Church Relations manager. Her job entailed working with representatives of similar agencies within the church to create educational and other programs.

She replaces Marcie Wilske, who becomes Chancellor on July 1.

Born in Oakland, Calif., Smith and her family moved often when she was growing up, following an eclectic itinerary that included Virginia Beach, Va.; Mechanicsburg, Penn.; Long Island, N.Y.; Cherry

Hill, N.J.; the Philippines; and finally, to Baldwin, Md., where her parents have retired.

In 1991, she graduated from St. Mary College of Maryland in St. Mary's, Md., with a degree in history. For three years after that, she tried to figure out what to do with her life. Smith spent time as a manager for a local pharmacy.

Having spent much of her life in transit and fascinated by maps, at one point during high school, she thought she might work for the National Geographic Society. However, that desire to travel ripened into a cultural anthropology that was linked to a desire to serve. "It became very clear to me that there were a great deal of problems in the world," she said.

Part of her searching led her to the Columbians, a Catholic missionary order with roots in China. "They have a motto that says 'A life unlike your own can be your teacher,'" she said. "As a missionary, you die to yourself and you are born to a new sense of humility."

Smith entered a six-month preparation program in Chicago to study theology, self-awareness and the skills needed for pastoral care. She also was trained in empowerment and organizing.

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Despite the preparation, when she began her mission in Taiwan, Smith recalled, she was frustrated and culturally challenged. "It meant being part of a different community. I was constantly learning and was constantly being transformed," she said.

She was fluent in Taiwanese, even though the language in government circles was Mandarin. "Taiwanese was what was spoken among the unions, the prisons and in the factories where I would be," she said.

During her time there, an accident damaged her knee and Smith had to return to the U.S. for up to six months of rehabilitation following surgery. However, she added, when the knee healed, she returned to complete the remainder of her three-year commitment.

In 1996, she returned to the U.S. but had trouble finding a job. Smith acknowledged that those who return home after serving in missions experience a "reverse mission call," which compels them to work tirelessly here to change foreign policies with the goal of alleviating the suffering witnessed in their original mission.

"It is an attempt to translate that missionary experience into ones who kept me going," Smith recalled. She was also struck by the hard times so many of the clients faced. Some were seniors living on fixed incomes, families in which the parents worked two jobs, and war veterans. "For me, it was a learning experience about poverty in the U.S."

On average, the facility served 900 meals each day during a two-hour lunch period.

It wasn't easy seeing the desperation felt by those seeking food. "I was hearing about the same problems coming from people over and over again," Smith said.

She needed to do something about it. "I wanted to get back to leadership development and advocacy."

Smith applied for and was hired as an associate in Catholic Charities Parish Social Ministries. Her responsibilities there were "extremely broad," she said, ranging from educating on justice issues, to recruiting legislative volunteers to conducting lobbying seminars.

At that point, Catholic Charities of Baltimore was not an agency of Catholic Charities USA, but was associated with the archdiocese. It independently ran 86 different programs, including everything from senior housing to employment training. "It's one of the biggest Catholic Charities in the U.S."

It also meant working with priests and the staff of the 146 parishes. "It meant a lot of relationship building," she said.

Another task was coordinating justice work with various departments and ministries in the archdiocese. Smith helped organize a Social Ministry Convocation that drew almost 600 participants. She also brought in a national program called "Just Faith," a 30-week series that helps Christians approach contemporary poverty problems from a perspective of faith.

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NEW PATH IN LIFE—Christine Smith, the recently-hired Parish and Community Partnership Coordinator for Catholic Charities of Idaho, discovered her passion for helping people as she traveled extensively before settling in Idaho. (JCR photo)

this culture and this country," she said.

However, her missionary experience was not a magnet for her resume when it came to finding a job in the U.S. economy. "It was very difficult. How do you fit that into your job description?"

Smith's younger sister was married, living in Marlboro, Mass., and was pregnant. Smith stayed there as she tried to readjust to American life. Smith was working as sales help in a toy store when she received a help wanted ad from her mom in Maryland. Catholic Charities in the Baltimore Archdiocese was looking for a manager for one of its programs, Our Daily Bread Soup Kitchen. She applied for the post, got the job and moved back home.

"The volunteers were the ones who kept me going," Smith recalled. She was also struck by the hard times so many of the clients faced. Some were seniors living on fixed incomes, families in which the parents worked two jobs, and war veterans. "For me, it was a learning experience about poverty in the U.S."

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"the guru of social justice ministry," at Catholic Relief Services, Smith said. "He said 'I want you to come work for us.' I jumped at the chance."

She became church relations manager, serving as a liaison to various agencies within the U.S. bishops' conference and other church-based agencies.

CRS had learned through a study several years earlier that because so much of their efforts occur outside the country and in devastated areas, "nobody really knew what CRS did.... We needed to help people understand that we help people overseas."

Smith worked on educational programs and ways to reach out to more people, which became part of the training program offered to diocesan directors.

Last year, she reached a milestone: Smith completed work on her master's in theology at St. Mary Seminary and University in Baltimore. It led her to re-evaluate where she was in life and where she wanted to be. She decided it was time to finally slow down, breathe, embrace the non-ministry parts of her life and spend more time with family.

Smith's older brother lives in Portland, Ore., and she has cousins, aunts and uncles she had visited occasionally in Seattle, so the Pacific Northwest seemed like a decent place to look. She had read that Boise was very "green" and that appealed to her desire to bike to work, with close proximity to mountains so she could enjoy hiking. It also was several notches slower than the fast-paced lifestyle she had grown weary of living in the shadow of Washington.

About that time, Catholic Charities of Idaho learned that Wilske had been tapped by Bishop Michael P. Driscoll to become chancellor, and she needed to be replaced.

"It was something I knew I could do," Smith said.

"I was looking to slow down, but it was important that there were things to do after work," she said. "It seemed like a supportive community, the same kind of mentality I saw in Seattle and Portland."

She flew out for the interview and then spent several days looking around the area. "I know what I don't like, and I liked it here.... What you see is what you get."

"For me, that's fantastic. I get my energy from collaboration," she said. "People here have their hearts in the right place."

After spending years in missionary work, and then training others to teach about social justice, "this is what I have been telling leaders in other dioceses" needs to be done, Smith said. "Now, I am getting to do it."