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## VICS: An Evolution of How VICS Serves

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# An Evolution of How VICS Serves

Joyce de Gooijer



Responding to needs in a new way, the concept of in-country volunteers was born.

Fr Francis Folleh visiting in-country volunteers at Talita Kum, a candle making factory in Mexico.

Forty-seven years ago, after Vatican II, the Spiritans started VICS with the idea of giving lay people the opportunity for mission work. Who knew, that from a philosophy of listening, presence and service, volunteers would learn about community, justice, new cultures, and even more importantly, themselves.

Many volunteers have maintained contact and a kinship with those we served. Someone shared that they have family in three different countries – a place where they are unconditionally given rest and food to eat.

This made me think of how many places and people have opened their lives to VICS volunteers – they welcomed us when we were weary, fed us when we were physically and spiritually hungry and treated us as family. We may have gone overseas with the thought of befriending others, but ultimately it was us who were befriended.

We were welcomed into many communities: school and medical communities, remote villages, refugee camps, and families. By being present and listening we learned about those we served, and to the best of our ability we walked

in their steps. As the bond of kinship grew stronger and we began to understand their lives, we may have been invited to walk with them. In an interesting and unique way, these kinships have played a significant role in the evolution of how VICS serves.



Ashley Rerrie, VICS volunteer and Ada Rivera, VICS in-country volunteer with Casa Pueblito in Nicaragua

## Responding in a new way

About 10 years ago, an interesting phenomenon began to unfold. Our kinship with others led to a rich, diverse opportunity for serving in many parts of the world. Through this service, we learned about dreams, desires and needs. While VICS was seeing a decrease in the number of Canadian volunteers we were meeting skilled, gifted indigenous people who were unemployed or had no opportunity for formal education. Responding to needs in a new way, the concept of in-country volunteers was born.

Rather than sending someone from Canada to volunteer, VICS began supporting trained indigenous people to do the job. People in-country continue to define their needs, and when possible VICS responds to those needs through financially supporting them. Rather than “forever funding”, VICS makes two-year financial commitments, supporting in-country volunteers with the hope of eventual self-sufficiency.

VICS is currently connected with 40 in-country volunteers in Mexico, Nicaragua, Tanzania, Gambia and Sierra Leone.

## One volunteer

Meet Fatima, a degree nurse working as coordinator for Hogar Luceros del Amanecer’s “One Life at a Time” program. This program identifies young pregnant girls living in extreme poverty who do not have access to health care. One girl in the program is on her own, abandoned by her mother and living without her father who is working in Costa Rica, trying to improve the family’s economic situation.

VICS in-country volunteers aren’t any different from former VICS volunteers: they are teachers, administrators, health-care providers and trades people.

## New look, same organization

Though VICS may have a slightly new look, we are the same organization as



we always have been, serving people of the world through pastoral work, education, vocational training and socio-economic development projects. As Ann Johnson says, “Each step along the way we clear stones and obstacles, healing and refreshing each other. We listen openly to each tale of travel and hear proposals for the time ahead.”

And move ahead we do, slightly revamped, with continued hopes for Canadian volunteers, while at the same time building on the power of kinship and the in-country volunteers we serve. ■

Top: In-country volunteer teachers, Kissi Bendu Secondary School, Sierra Leone

Bottom: Teaching staff in-country volunteers at Olkokola, Tanzania.