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# Canadian Spiritans Choose Edmonton Priest as Head

*Fr. Bob Colburn has been pastor of 3 parishes, now is VICS Director*

*Ramon Gonzalez*

**A**s director of VICS (Volunteer International Christian Service) Father Bob Colburn is a busy man, responsible for finding, hiring and posting volunteers in Spiritan missions around the world. He travels often to other countries to visit mission sites. He also fills in as pastor and hospital chaplain in Edmonton.

Now he has been handed an additional responsibility. In May he was elected provincial superior for the Spiritans of the TransCanada Province, which is made up of nearly 60 English-speaking Spiritan priests and brothers living in Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan.

“Without a doubt it’s a challenge in these times to take on any leadership with the Church,” he said at his Millwoods home. “At the same time it’s exciting and rather humbling because of the sense that it was an election; so I received confirmation from the people I’ll be working with.”

As provincial superior, Colburn, one of eight Spiritans in Alberta, will be head of a five-member leadership team. At the same time he will continue to serve as director of VICS until “we can put in place the transition” in the next two or three years. “I’ll be in Ontario for part of each month and in Edmonton for part of each month.”

Colburn, 56, said the challenges he faces as superior are also the great hopes in the Church today. “For instance, one of the challenges that I face is an aging community. We have to take care of them. But at the same time our retired priests are also our hope because they have already done so much and established so many of the good works that we now hope to continue.”

## Utilizing gifts and talents of members

Except for three men who recently joined the order’s novitiate in Chicago, the Spiritans have few vocations in North America. But they have great numbers willing to join them in Africa, Asia and South Africa.

The challenge for the Canadian Spiritans is to integrate foreign priests who are coming to serve here.

“Over the years we’ve invited people from Portugal, the Caribbean, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Poland to come and work with us here in Canada. We have to welcome them, incorporate them and utilize all their gifts and talents,” Colburn explained. “They are the hope as we continue the work we began here in Canada over 50 years ago.

“Another challenge is that we have many positions to be filled but we don’t have the people. You can’t put all the people into administration because you lose your whole reason for being.”

The Spiritans also have a good number of lay associates. Lay associates make a life-long commitment to the spirituality, mission and vision of the order. “Our challenge is how to best utilize their gifts and talents,” Colburn said.

## Vocation story

Born in Carrot River, Sask., Colburn met the Spiritans in 1978 when he became a VICS volunteer and was sent to Africa to teach. He spent four years in Kenya and Gambia and then, after his return to Canada, he joined the order and began studies for the priesthood.

What he liked about the Spiritans was their welcoming nature, the fact they involved laymen and women in their ministry and the work they were doing, mainly caring for those who had been overlooked by society and even the Church.

“That was very attractive,” he said. “There is something very special about this community; plus the fact they are also very laidback, very simple. They are not into structures. They are not into having everybody do the same thing or everybody live the same way.

“We don’t have religious garb. We are invited to dress as the clergy do wherever



we work. We are not distinctive; we are not standing out. We try to be part of the local cultures where we work.”

## Served in Stettler, Hinton and Edmonton

Colburn was ordained in 1989 in Gull Lake, Sask., where his family lived at the time. He worked in vocation ministry for his community until he was sent to the Archdiocese of Edmonton. He served as pastor in Stettler, Hinton and St. Theresa Parish in Edmonton before taking over the directorship of VICS seven years ago.

## VICS volunteers

VICS volunteers make a commitment to serve in overseas missions for a minimum of two years. Some teach in high schools or universities. Others are part of the “medical component” made up of doctors, nurses, nursing instructors and physiotherapists.

There is also the community development side to VICS. “Through programs, usually initiated by a diocese, community development workers try to enable local people to have a better life.”

VICS community development volunteers currently serve in countries such as Guatemala, Nicaragua, Gambia and Togo.

“We always have more positions open than we ever have people to do the work,” Colburn said. VICS usually has 20 to 25 people serving at any one time.

The new provincial superior believes his time as a VICS volunteer led him to become a Spiritan. “There was a strong confirmation while I was in Africa that this is what I should be doing with the rest of my life,” he said. ■

Courtesy Western Catholic Reporter.