

We sat in anxious silence anticipating a rare sight. It was a quintessential Midwestern Spring Day: a cloudless turquoise sky marked only by the occasional flitting of a coppery wood thrush, and the sort of climate that leaves you feeling as if you're floating, aware of neither warmth nor chill. The vibrant afternoon sun behind us illuminated the hilled field rising in front of us such that the golden remnants of last season's corn stalks glimmered.

And then it crested the hill. Its six-foot wide red head rose first, followed by the silver of its 120-foot wingspan, spraying and hissing as it moved rapidly downhill toward us.

It was bean planting time in rural northeastern Nebraska. But first, the fields had to be prepared, and quickly. In a land where temperatures can fluctuate by 30 degrees in a day and several inches rain might fall in an even shorter span, perfect days were not to be whiled away. And so, as its expert operator gave us a wave, the field sprayer zipped past the gravel road and the pickup truck in which we sat, and on to the next rolling hill.

Such was the sight earlier this year when two Columban Fathers -- an Irish farmer by way of decades of mission in Pakistan and an Iowan farmer by way of decades of mission in Korea -- joined three Columban benefactors on their farm, and me, for a visit. I was just two months on the job in Omaha -- the city in which I was born, raised and have lived my entire life -- in my lay role as a member of the benefactor relations team. Given my limited experience with mission and the role of laity and having known for a short time just one of my five companions, endeavoring as I had to bring these men together had raised some eyebrows and rankled some nerves. But somehow, I knew it was a mission of gratitude that must take place.

Merriam-Webster online defines laity as the people of a religion who are not priests, ministers, etc. Not being of the clergy, our work as lay persons is not always clearly delineated. Working with Columban missionary priests who have dedicated their lives to multifaceted work with justice and peace groups, differently abled people, abused women and children, tribal people, Muslim communities and organic farmers, I constantly seek to answer the open-ended question of how to best enrich mission. I believe my prayers help. My financial gifts are small by some standards, but perennial. I donate the vegetables and herbs I grow in the St. Columban Community Garden to those in our community who may experience food insecurity. I strive to meet as many benefactors as I can to express our gratitude for everything they do, and whenever possible, introduce them to the Columban missionaries in whose work they are partners.

Gifts that may be brought to bear in the enhancement of mission are as rich and varied as the individuals comprised by the laity. Overlaying and coloring the capacities and talents of the laity are local culture and customs, geography, political climate, and economic or educational standing in society. As the world changes, the church changes and so does the role of the laity. Perhaps the only universal definition of the role of laity is that we do what we can.

All Catholics have the opportunity to fulfill their baptismal responsibility for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. As laypersons we may deepen our commitments through prayer, personal sacrifices, and gifts for the missions and for missionaries. We can reach out to others less blessed. We can share the Gospel with everyone. We can encourage others to consider their roles as partners in mission by virtue of their Baptism and express our gratitude to everyone who answers the call in whatever way they are able.

My service as a member of the laity has not led me far from home, but it has connected me to my brothers and sisters around the world and blessed me in ways I could not have imagined.