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God's Work

Eric F. Spina
University of Dayton, efspina@udayton.edu

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Monday November 16, 2020

God's Work

By Eric F. Spina

Some saw an eyesore. Sister Angela Ann Zukowski, M.H.S.H., saw the future.

In the early 1980s, on the cusp of the information technology revolution, a huge satellite dish — the brainchild of Sister Angela Ann — was installed in a campus parking lot to receive religious programming from the Catholic Telecommunications Network of America.

This satellite dish stood as a symbol of faith — the belief that technology could be harnessed to share the gospel message.

In those pioneering days, Sister Angela Ann copied CTNA programs and drove the video cassettes to regional cable stations. She co-produced and hosted video teleconferences for CTNA and then, with the advent of the Internet, ventured into distance learning with the Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation. VLCFF has grown to become the premier provider of e-learning to the global Catholic Church.

And talk about impact. In its two decades, the VLCFF has delivered 137 courses to nearly 60,000 adult learners in English, Spanish and Arabic in 88 dioceses in 77 countries on six continents. It's grown largely by word of mouth, but its flexible, 24-7 faith formation classes fulfill a need in dioceses, from the Diocese of Anchorage, Alaska, to the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia.

"We had our finger on the pulse and created a new way of being a Church in a digital milieu," says Sister Angela Ann, who leads UD's Institute for Pastoral Initiatives with boundless energy and vision. "It's a ministry. It's God's work."

This is what our Catholic, Marianist university is all about. We serve the Catholic Church and the human community to respond to the needs of our times. As the VLCFF celebrates its 20th anniversary, I found myself pausing to reflect on a few of the myriad ways we're faithful to our religious mission.

We strive to form people of faith as we educate the next generation of theologians and lay leaders. Through the Forum for Young Catechetical Learners, students give up their Saturdays to develop the foundation to teach religion classes. Through the Lalanne program, faith-filled teachers learn to serve in parochial schools as they live together in community and earn their master's degrees. In a field with a high turnover rate for young teachers, a remarkable 89 percent of Lalanne's 200 graduates are still teaching, mostly in Catholic schools.

We strive to be a prophetic voice — whether it's our faculty and staff hosting a listening session on racism in collaboration with the Archdiocese of Cincinnati or our students tackling migration through stories of tragedy, courage and hope.

We strive to interpret the signs of the times and respond with compassion and faith. Through our Empowering Children with Hope and Opportunity program, counselors and mental health professionals are equipping students in urban Catholic classrooms with skills in resiliency, empathy, problem solving and peacemaking.

This work is more than a reflection of our mission as an engaged Catholic university. It's God's work.

(Read more about [the work of the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives](#), which is currently running a [crowdfunding campaign](#) through Dec. 1 to help Catholic school educators, church ministers and UD alumni financially affected by COVID-19 to continue their religious education through

the VLCFF's e-courses. This essay originally appeared in the spring issue of the University of Dayton Magazine.)