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At one of the world's largest Catholic parishes — St. Mary's Catholic Church in Dubai — priests are kept busy celebrating Mass, hearing confessions and serving hundreds of thousands of parishioners.

They have little time to educate the flock in adult faith formation. But they have turned to an able assistant for help: the University of Dayton.

The University's Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation (VLCFF) recently signed a partnership agreement with the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia to offer online education to parishioners in Oman, Yemen and the United Arab Emirates. Just 31 students were selected for the pilot course in September, but the Vicariate expects this number to grow — quickly.

"If we didn't introduce this slowly, we know we'd have a tidal wave of people signing up, easily thousands," said Monsignor Francis Jamieson of the Office of Christian Formation and former vicar general. "We have no structure in place outside of the parishes for faith formation, yet most of our parishioners work 12-hour days and are spread out in 14 parishes in three countries.

"The VLCFF provides teachers and materials, and with it being online, we can reach people wherever they are, even in the middle of the desert."

The VLCFF has a short history but a strong tradition of reaching out to Catholics worldwide. Managed by the University of Dayton's Institute for Pastoral Initiatives, the VLCFF reaches into 182 Catholic dioceses and more than 40 countries. It is an online religious education program open to the public, offering about 80 courses on topics such as doctrine, church history, sacraments, prayer, the Bible and social justice.

Sister Angela Ann Zukowski, M.H.S.H., the director of the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives, said the international growth of the program has been entirely organic, spreading through word of mouth and mutual interests.

"Dioceses come to us because many have limited resources in their geographic territories for adult education, and we're going to them because it's very much a part of our Catholic, Marianist identity," Zukowski said. "We are not parochial, we are universal. The best way to appreciate the breadth of the church is to be in classrooms with people from around the world."

Participation in the VLCFF has increased rapidly since it began in 2000 with 61 participants. In 2011, more than 5,600 people registered for courses, with about 6 percent of them (327) coming from outside of the U.S.

This number is expected to grow, as the VLCFF reaches out to more countries. In addition to the Vicariate of Southern Arabia, new partnerships in 2011 included Barbados and St. Vincent in the Caribbean. Even in the absence of signed agreements with international dioceses, students are hearing about the courses and signing up, as many have done in Latin American countries, Zukowski said.

And the international engagement doesn't stop with the VLCFF. The Institute for Pastoral Initiatives brokered a partnership between the University of Dayton's School of Education and Allied Professions and the Catholic Church in Trinidad and Tobago to offer online master's degree programs in Catholic school leadership.

The master's degree program was the first to be offered at the Catholic Religious Education Development Institute (CREDI), established in 2007 by the Archdiocese of Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, West Indies.

CREDI graduated its first class of 17 students — with University of Dayton diplomas — in September. Today, the institute has about 60 faculty, 18 administrators and 600 students and offers its own bachelor's degree programs, a significant first step in becoming an accredited university.

"My hope is the University of Dayton can demonstrate a great partnership with the Catholic Church to serve the whole Caribbean," Zukowski said. "Ultimately, I'd like to see the initiatives of CREDI become an outstanding Catholic University of the
West Indies."

While the VLCFF meets a critical need for the Catholic Church by offering adult faith education, Zukowski said the attention to each partners needs is what sets it apart from other online and distance learning programs.

"We design courses in light of what our students and partners are telling us they need," she said. "Eventually, we'd like to have hundreds of courses, each tailored to the unique needs of our partners."

This could mean courses in different languages — some courses are already offered in Spanish — or developing specific tracks and certificate programs. The partners drive the discussion, Zukowski said.

Of course, this appealed to the Vicariate of Southern Arabia.

"A big plus is the way the program wants your feedback," said Catherine Miles-Flynn, director of the Office of Christian Formation. "This is a different model. They really care about what's going to work. They ask about, and actually listen to our needs. This is not a way for the school to make money; this is a ministry."

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