**Table of Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>India</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excerpts from Interviews</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Interviews</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>South Africa</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excerpts from Interviews</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Interviews</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>El Salvador</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excerpts from Interviews</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Interviews</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs

The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, created within the Office of the President in 2006, is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, ethics, and public life. Through research, teaching, and service, the Center explores global challenges of democracy and human rights; economic and social development; international diplomacy; and interreligious understanding. Two premises guide the Center’s work: that a deep examination of faith and values is critical to address these challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

About the Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching, and Service

The Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service (CSJ), founded in 2001, seeks to advance justice and the common good through promoting and integrating community-based research, teaching and service by collaborating with diverse partners and communities. CSJ works in three key areas: community and public service, curriculum and pedagogy, and research. Through such critical and engaged work, Georgetown builds on its tradition of academic excellence and contributes in singular ways to the Jesuit ideal of justice education and action “for the glory of God and the well-being of humankind.” CSJ executive director Kathleen Maas Weigert helped to create the Social Justice and Education Project before leaving for Loyola University Chicago in 2010. Jane Genster now serves as CSJ interim executive director.
Introduction

This report reflects on the second year of the Education and Social Justice Project, which provided three Georgetown University students with fellowships to travel to India, South Africa, and El Salvador to conduct in-depth examinations of innovative educational initiatives, with a focus on the work of Jesuit secondary and post-secondary institutions.

We are learning more every day about the deep connections between global challenges of poverty and education. Only through better access to education will the world’s poor be able to seize opportunities in an increasingly global economy. While policy analysts have documented the widespread failure of governments to meet this imperative, we still know relatively little about successful local efforts led by religious communities to advance economic and social development through education. In order to engage Georgetown undergraduates and build knowledge in this critical area, two Georgetown University centers - the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs and the Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching, and Service - created the Education and Social Justice Project in early 2010.

Under faculty guidance, the select group of students awarded fellowships gather information through interviews, analyze best practices, and share their reports and conclusions with a wider global audience. The project is made possible through the generous support of Rodney Jacob, a member of the University Board of Regents.

During its second year, the project awarded three fellowships to students who spent three weeks with a Jesuit institution engaged in efforts to promote social justice through education. Deven Comen (Georgetown College) traveled to Mumbai, India, to research St. Xavier’s College’s involvement in promoting social justice and education in the rapidly developing city. Conor Finnegan (Georgetown College) studied the Jesuit Institute’s “Believing in Creation and Evolution” program in Johannesburg, South Africa. Codie Kane (Georgetown College) partnered with the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas in El Salvador to explore the relationship between social and economic inequity and differential access to education in the San Salvador region.

During its first year, Ryan Covington (School of Foreign Service) focused on St. Aloysius Gonzaga School in Nairobi, Kenya. Brian Dillon (Georgetown College) researched the work of the Ateneo Center for Education Development in Manila, Philippines. And Cindy Shuck (School of Foreign Service) explored the work of the Universidad Alberto Hurtado in Santiago, Chile.

This report brings together the main results of the field work, including background analysis of each of the initiatives and excerpts from extended interviews with educators and activists in each country. More background material and full interview transcripts for both years are available on the project website: http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/projects/education-and-social-justice-project

The Education and Social Justice Project is administered by Melody Fox Ahmed of the Berkley Center. Elizabeth Andretta of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and Katherine Marshall of the Berkley Center serve as academic advisors.
Overview
Deven Comen, a senior in the Government Honors Program in Georgetown College, is from Durham, Connecticut. She studied abroad during her junior year in Pune, India, and was excited to return to India in June 2011 to study issues of social justice and education in the rapidly developing country. As a guest of St. Xavier’s College, a Jesuit university in Mumbai, Deven conducted a series of interviews with the school’s students, faculty, and staff to examine the community’s response to issues underlying India’s advancement into the global economy: malnutrition, gender bias, corruption in the public and private spheres, the rural/urban divide, access to credit, religious and cultural divides, and “inclusive growth.”

Partner Institution: St. Xavier’s College Mumbai, India
St. Xavier’s College first began when two dedicated students applied for its recognition as a College of Arts in December of 1868. Since then, its graduates have gone on to occupy important positions in the Indian government and the Catholic priesthood; many have also pursued careers in the medicine, education, engineering and business. The institution finds its inspiration in the spirit of St. Xavier, a sixteenth century saint, scholar, and Jesuit priest, and seeks to form men and women who will build a more just and peaceful world. The school promotes an educational philosophy that focuses on thinking critically and creatively, acting with compassion, integrity and respect, and working for those who live on the margins of society. It forms part of a network that consists of more than one hundred schools, twenty-four colleges, and countless non-formal adult education institutions run by Jesuit priests throughout India. St. Xavier’s College is dedicated to promoting the values of the Jesuit order and is constantly searching for innovative research and teaching methods that will aid in the creation of a society based on freedom and justice.
Teaching Exposure: Social Justice Formation at St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai

This report identifies creative practices to promote the Jesuit tradition of cura personalis, a Catholic concept meaning education of the entire person, in Indian college students at St. Xavier’s College-Mumbai. The report analyzes various programs and curriculum in place at the College, highlighting strengths and identifying hurdles to building students attuned to greater issues of poverty, development, and education in India. The analysis is drawn from numerous informal discussions and over fifteen formal interviews with an array of professors, students, organizations, and Jesuits in Mumbai.

Poverty in Mumbai and Educational Challenges

The epicenter of Indian commerce, finance, and trade, the city of Mumbai represents India’s continued rise to global dominance. Yet, from the 27th floor of the richest man in India’s tower are commanding views of the city’s 6.5 million slum-dwellers, who now constitute 52.5% of Mumbai’s population. Mukesh Ambani’s skyscrapers—with three hanging gardens, a cinema, a yoga studio, and a helipad—represent the “two Indias,” one rapidly growing in wealth and importance on the world stage, and the other left unconnected to the positive effects of development.

For some, Ambani’s tower is a symbol of national pride, to others it stands as an outrageous representation of the country’s inequality.

While political rhetoric of inclusive growth focuses on more development, better governance, and wider socio-economic opportunities, the very stresses of economic development have created disparities that divide Indian society between rich and poor, urban and rural. Indeed, an enormous portion of India’s 1.3 billion people has not benefited from the country’s GDP growth. About 700 million Indians still survive on less than $2 a day, and more than 40 percent of children aged five and under are underweight. A 2010 United Nations report found that 421 million Indians were living in extreme “multi-dimensional” poverty—a greater number than in Africa’s 26 poorest countries combined.¹

In terms of education, India has guaranteed a right to education for all children up to 14 years of age. However, 35 percent of its population remains illiterate, only 15% of students reach high school, and just 7% graduate. In Mumbai, schools are either run by the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) or the Brihanmum-
bai Municipal Corporation (BMC) in which case they are called public schools, or run privately by trusts and individuals. Private schools have become a preferred option to a majority of city residents owing to better facilities and use of English as a medium of instruction. All private schools are affiliated either with the Maharashtra state SSC board or the all-India Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) and CBSE boards. The government-run public schools lack many facilities, but are the only options for most of the poor who cannot afford the fees in private schools; as a result, 40% of the 1.1 million children living in the city of Mumbai attend government schools. In Mumbai, the statistics are startling. Only 3.78% Mumbai children aged 5-10 are out-of-school, yet one out of every four girls drops out of studies before completing her formal secondary education. Overall, 50% of Indian children drop out rate between grade 1 and grade 5, and 90% dropout by grade 10.2 Certain areas of the city have a high concentration of out-of-school children, often as high as 25%. In addition, the quality of learning indicators is persistently low—up to 25% absenteeism amongst government school teachers.

After ten years of schooling, students enroll for two years in a Junior College where they follow one of four popular streams: Arts, Commerce, Science, or Law. This is followed by a professional degree course in the corresponding stream for three years. Nearly all professional colleges in Mumbai are affiliated with the University of Mumbai, but as of June 2010, St. Xavier's College gained autonomy, and it now has the responsibility of designing its own courses, framing its own syllabi, and conducting its own evaluation of its students.

St. Xavier's College, Mumbai: Not just a college, a way of life

In this city of stunning inequality, St. Xavier's College "strives to form men and women who will build a more just and humane world."3 One of the most prestigious liberal arts colleges in India, St. Xavier's encourages its students to embrace an intellectual endeavor that focuses on critical and creative thinking, with the aim of social transformation. In the Jesuit spirit of cura personalis, a Catholic concept meaning education of the entire person, St. Xavier's strives for a comprehensive, all around for-
mation of its students, so that they graduate with more competence, compassion, and a commitment to serving the poor. According to President Dr. Frazer Mascarenhas, S.J., students at the university like to say that St. Xavier's is a way of life, not just a college. With its motto “Provocans ad volandum” or “encouraging to fly,” Xavier's strives to challenge its students and staff to live a life of the mind for the life of the world. One student describes the motto and accompanying imagery of the mother eagle pushing the baby eagles out of the nest as a sign of the ambition St. Xavier's hopes to inspire in its students. Combining development of the whole person with a continual pursuit of excellence, St. Xavier's, in the words of one student "is one of the only colleges in India that allows for excellent academics, extracurricular, and social work."

Influence of the Jesuit Values Promotion

Although some students remark that the overt presence of Jesuits define the college, others feel the Jesuit influence as more of an undercurrent. “Even professors who are Jesuit priests don’t really talk about Christianity,” one student said. “Besides our Principal and certain professors being Jesuits and the crucifixes in the classrooms, it is not immediately obvious.” Similarly, “[e]ven though this is a Jesuit institution, Father Frazer is quite a secular man,” another student said. “We have students coming from many religious backgrounds. I couldn’t tell you a difference between a Jesuit institution and another one, except for this sort of mindset” that promotes “four important policies.”

Nearly all interviewees shared the same four specific dimensions of a St. Xavier’s education—academics, extracurriculars, social work, and the spiritual. As President Frazer Mascarenhas says, “First, we encourage excellence. We don't restrict excellence to the academic, but instead believe one should strive for excellence in all areas including the social, cultural, and spiritual spheres. The second value we deeply believe in is justice. Our country badly needs justice. Third, we encourage a quest for the divine. Our students often have their own religious commitments better understood after dialoguing with their peers of other faiths. They have a deepened understanding of their own religion.”

Several students discussed the role of spirituality on cam-
“Over the course of the year, I realized spirituality is quite different from religion,” one shared. While “[r]eligion is often mandated…spirituality is within us. It is all about having a good outlook towards life, doing good to others, and working towards a common good.” As Dr. Vivien Amonkar, the Head of the Departments of Microbiology and Biotechnology and former Vice Principal of Academic Improvement, says, “A Jesuit education means ‘aiming for the skies.’ We may not reach there but we strive for excellence, always. A Jesuit education is also about honesty and transparency in all systems. Through a Jesuit education one can gain the feeling of ‘the other’.” At the same time, Father Anthony Dias feels more improvements can be made to enhance student exposure to the harsh realities of India. “Xavier’s College is an island…we literally have a fortress, with walls on all four sides. I feel at the level of the college, I think we are doing quite a bit but we need to scale up to the mainstream to make a real difference.”

The educators at St. Xavier’s promote Jesuit values through the four dimensions of the college, but social work is an area of particular emphasis, especially after the College gained autonomy. One long-standing student-run extracurricular organization at St. Xavier’s, the Social Service League (SSL), engages students in service immersion in the local Mumbai context. Another initiative, entitled the Social Involvement Program started as an academic requirement for students in the honors program, but as of 2008 it is mandatory for all St. Xavier’s students. The Social Involvement Program (SIP) invites students to participate in a minimum of 60 hours of community service, as well as discussion and journaling activities to enhance the meaningful engagement with nonprofits.

Social Service League (SSL)

Founded in 1951 on campus, the Social Service League (SSL) recognized “the necessity to do service to the less fortunate, illiterate and poor brothers” of India. The general secretary of the SSL, Neal Maheshwari, reports that while member fees “are nominal, [about] 20 rupees a year,” The SSL has 800 members, which generate 16,000 rupees to fund projects. He estimates about 10% of Xavier’s is actively involved in the SSL and about 50% have been involved in some way during the course of his/her education. The Motto of the SSL is “God’s Service in Man’s service.” One of the most important activities of the SSL are the immersion camps that bring students to rural Maharashtra to perform service work and hard labor with the rural poor. As Father Terry Quadros, faculty advisor of over 25 years to the SSL, says, “I always preface our village visits with the caveat that, ‘you’re not going to change this village but more importantly you are going to change yourselves.’ With 50 inexperienced people doing manual work, we will not make a big impact. But what do they get? They get an experience in rural living: simple lives, roughing it out without toilets, sleeping on cow dung patched floors in huts. What is important is the interaction with one another such that the team functions rather than the individual.” Through these trips, Fr. Quadros notices the students “adjust beautifully and uncomplainingly” and observes their growth from “being somewhat hesitant and passive individuals to becoming more confident about their abilities and adding on a willingness to take up responsibility and leadership.”

Besides the camps, there are blood donation drives, volunteer opportunities at a home for paraplegic people, PROJECT CARE (which assists underprivileged children), awareness exhibitions on social issues, and an environ-
mental initiative called G.I. Joe, which recycling old bicycles, vermiculture, redistributing old books and clothes, and the recycling of electronic waste. Some feel the SSL serves more of a social purpose than a true exposure to poverty. Father Dias say, “My dream would be to have an organized program to introduce more depth and focus to social justice…[while] students feel accomplished after doing manual labor and build friendships, and it ends with a great party in the night. There should be more reflection and interaction with the people around.”

Social Involvement Program (SIP)

“Jesuits generally believe that when the heart is touched by direct action, the mind is challenged to change. This is our hope for students in the Social Involvement Program,” President Frazer Mascarenhas, S.J., expressed. Students volunteer at an NGO for 60 hours over the course of a semester, while writing journal reflections on their experiences. After participating in SIP, one student noticed a marked difference in himself, which he termed “the attitude of gratitude.” He shared his experience mentoring several children through Youth for Youth, an NGO providing after-school programming for disadvantaged children in Bandra. This work “gave [him] insight into the lives of these children,” who “lived in a different background than” he, yet were “so vibrant.” Working with these children gave this St. Xavier’s student “a sense of gratefulness for what [he had].” Another student realized

“My service work has become an integral part of my life. I’ve realized when I do it, I’m happy. It is not a matter of compulsion.”

However, many students oppose the mandatory nature of the Social Involvement Program. One student noted that “all of the 800 members of [Social Service League] gripe about SIP because [they] don’t want to be forced to do something good.” It seems that the mandatory nature, “strict rules,” and rigorous standards for what work actually constitutes hours bother students more than the idea of doing social justice work in their city. “Because the service is enforced and monitored, you lose some of the charm of social service,” says one student. Agnelo Menezes, Economics Professor and Faculty Advisor to SIP, sees issues with the current program: “Frankly, I think the SIP is superficial because it is not involving or engaging. It is simply imposing. We do not have sessions with our students after they have finished their pen work and leg work. Now I want to work with Nadine and Jennipher [the SIP staff] to get students to discuss what is happening while they are serving. I want to make this engaging—mentally and not just physically. When you get physically engaged you become charitable. When you get mentally engaged you become angry. It is not that I want students to necessarily be angry, but I want them to understand the injustice.”

Other faculty leaders, however, fully support the newly mandated program. Professor Fleur D’Souza notes that: SIP is not “just social service, not going out and doing charity to feel happy about oneself. This program was meant to engage students. It requires them to think on paper, in the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm, which requires reflection, contextualization, and action.” In President Frazer Mascarenhas’s words, “[when a student chooses St. Xavier’s College, they choose Jesuit education because they trust us as good educators with perspective on faith and justice and centuries of experience. “We do not accept complacency or the “status quo” in the Jesuit Society, nor in our Xavier’s students,” says Father Errol Fernandez. “I keep challenging my students through both my words and actions to make a difference in the world. Our focus is to
Continued Inspiration

The culture of excellence at St. Xavier’s has bred impressive accomplishments by alumni and helps students feel included into a network of support and resources. One student shared that “in the back of my mind I know, if I want to do something, I will most probably have the support of Xavier’s College and its resources.”

Shaheen Mistri, the CEO and founder of Teach for India, feels that St. Xavier’s College provided her with experiences and challenges that made her who she is. Though Shaheen grew up all over the world, she never visited India until she was 18 to visit her grandparents in Mumbai. Interactions with the poor street beggars touched her deeply, and she chose to leave Tufts University and come to live in India at St. Xavier’s College. Through her self-created internship following a Times of India reporter, Shaheen observed first-hand the plight of children without educational opportunities. She went on to found Akanksha, an organization that reaches out to around 4000 low-income children in Mumbai and Pune through two models: the after-school or center model and the school model. After several years engaged in this work, Shaheen founded Teach for India in 2008, a nationwide movement of outstanding college graduates and young professionals who commit two-years to teach full-time in under-resourced schools and who become lifelong leaders working from within various sectors toward the pursuit of equity in education. She believes that “St. Xavier’s definitely had an impact” on her development, though she felt spending time in the community in her free time informed her interest in social justice. Today, she feels that St. Xavier’s pushes students to have practical experiences working with the poor, a crucial occurrence for real social change to happen.

Embracing Diversity and Promoting Systemic Change

The kind of systemic change made from both an academic and extracurricular perspective has institutionalized St. Xavier’s commitments to social justice education and diversity. Father Dias notes “there is a clear Jesuit focus in our admissions policy and our concessions to marginalized groups.” President Frazer Mascarenhas mentions one of the ways St. Xavier’s promotes values is “through the personality and human values development program.” Over three semesters, students take an environment course, a course called “Giving Voice to Values,” and a human rights course. Professor Rajendra Shinde’s “Environmental Impact” course discusses corruption and injustice caused by the government and its effects the environment.

Another example that illustrates the school’s commitment to diversity is the opening of the night Commerce College. Fr. Valero Aleu SJ and Father Errol Fernandez began the Commerce Section of St. Xavier’s in 1988. As Fr. Fernandez says, “The Society of Jesus wanted tangible and practical benefits for the poor, even in higher education….Before 1988, if you walked onto Xavier’s campus, you would find the latest styles and fashions of the richest people in the city of Mumbai. This changed dramatically in 1988.” The new commerce course enrolled only the poorest of the poor. There were “students who had stopped studying five years prior, students who had failed the standard 12th four or even five times and we would take them in…. [t]he majority of the students who come here are working, as servers, waiters, cooks, peons, and sweepers,” remarked Fernandez.

One student remarked that St. Xavier’s did not need to
set up institutions like the language lab, the Commerce Course, or the Xavier’s Resource Centre for the Visually Challenged (XRCVC), which go above and beyond the call of duty.

Diversity came across as a key theme of St. Xavier’s values. One initiative at St. Xavier’s designed to increase diversity is the Student Beneficiary Fund (SBF). Through the SBF, financially disadvantaged students apply for funds used commonly for tuition, meals, books, journals, and field trips. The awarded amount varies, though tuition fees, about 5000 rupees, are the most common request. Professor Sangeetha Chavan who manages the SBF along with Father Pesso, notes that Xavier’s also has external scholarships besides government aid. Scholarships, usually alumni-funded, are given to the physically handicapped and students who are financially disadvantaged but succeed academically. Professor D’Souza also notes the “50% reservation for Christians. The Christian population is not a very wealthy section of the city. Many of them are first generation college students. They come from mill worker families or dockworker families and [their attendance of St. Xavier’s] has contributed to socioeconomic diversity.”

The College also has some partnerships that spur financial assistance for disadvantaged students. President Frazer Mascarenhas, S.J. remarked, “[t]he Ford Foundation approached us with a model of enabling those who are disadvantaged. We were interested because we have a number of seats reserved for those disadvantaged by caste or economic means….We cannot make a better world if we work alone. The key is networking and strengthening each other’s hands, building up a world in partnerships.”

The staff of St. Xavier’s certainly feel they are making investments in the future of India and take their roles very seriously. As Father Terry Quadros notes, “at the end of one’s Xavier’s experience it is not how many marks you have got, but what kind of person you became that is important.” He says, “One of my favorite quotations is from Krista McAuliffe who died in the spaceship Challenger explosion long ago. When asked, what do you do, she answered: ‘I touch the future. I teach.’ That statement gives meaning and immortality to what we as staff should be about at Xavier’s. We touch the future…and having that responsibility we should put in as much commitment and enthusiasm into all that we are doing here.” Professor Chavan, who remarked, “I travel about 3.5 hours a day to come here and back to my home” also echoes these sentiments. “The encouragement from my students makes it worth it for me. [Or as one] of my colleagues says, coming to Xavier’s is ‘her daily tonic’. For Father Errol Fernandez, he never dreamed he would be working in an institution. “My dream was to work in the villages with the poorest of the poor,” he says. “But then, sitting here in this office that I do, I realize that I am doing similar work that Jesuits in the villages do. The satisfaction that I draw from my work is to know that I am making a difference to those who never thought they would have the opportunity to ever go to a college and be graduates.”

Similarly, Dr. Vivien Amonkar remarks: “After a Jesuit education, many of our students become important leaders in several aspects of India. By having these values, they can influence others. We as staff realize that we have a role in training good citizens.”

Professor Periyanayagi (Perrie) Subramaniam feels there are five distinct ways in which St. Xavier’s College teaches its students awareness of, and concern for, the poor. First, a Jesuit education “should create awareness of rights of citizenship and how to demand rights without protest,” which can be done through guest lectures. Second, curriculum can promote active newsgathering of not only current affairs but also the fine print and laws that implement governance. Third, curriculum-oriented projects probe into the real reasons for lack of public amenities. Fourth, campus festivals can create both student community awareness and citizen awareness
programs through student engagement. Last, an overall culture of achievement and service inculcates strong social values along with personal accountability. As Fr. Dias puts it, “[a]cademic excellence and social engagement are communicating pillars holding the whole edifice. Students who are involved in social engagement tend to do better academically. They bring serious questions to the classroom. Educating the whole person in his view must involve “preparing cadres for justice through exposure.”

Father Frazer has grand ambitions for St. Xavier’s College. In the final stages of his Presidency, he envisions “[t]he next step for St. Xavier’s is to become an independent university, the first Catholic university in the city…Many of our programs and initiatives are copied by other schools, and I believe the honors program and social involvement program are unique enough to inspire.” Even now, “St. Xavier’s can be a bridge between rural and urban India. We are exposing students to the diversity of rural life in numerous ways while they attend work camps or serve rural migrants to Mumbai in their SIP work. [Professor Aggie Menezes’s] ragpicker research engages the students in experiencing first-hand fieldwork. We strive to conscientize the upper section [of society: our students]. Xavier’s can truly play a catalyst role in bringing about change in India. We link-up with NGOs without partisan or religious agendas, especially steering clear of the Hindutva groups. We too seek a democratic and secular country and will work to amplify those ideas.”

Professor Rajendra Shinde uses the following metaphor upon describing the purpose of a Jesuit education at St. Xavier’s College: “We make students aware. It is like lighting one lamp that spreads the light to another lamp.” In the same way, Father Errol Fernandez remarks, “teaching students about concern for others, about ostentatiousness, selflessness, and the need for giving are some ways in which we try to make a difference. The shirt and trousers I am wearing is the only shirt and only pair of trousers I’ve worn for the past six years. And the students know it. That is my way of showing sacrifice. I don’t use a bike, I don’t use a car, I walk. I try to tell them there is another way, there is the narrow door.”

St. Xavier’s enjoys certain notoriety internationally and even consults other colleges on aspects of social justice education. The sustainability of the St. Xavier’s model is definitely aided by outside donors and partnerships, though the audacious personalities of its administrators determined to put St. Xavier’s at the top of the education sector propel the college towards new opportunities. Some of their efforts have resulted in partnerships with the Ford Foundation to provide scholarships for deserving students, very strong ties with the embassies and consulates in Mumbai, and international partnerships, exchanges, research collaboration, and programs with universities in the United Kingdom and the United States, including Georgetown University. St. Xavier’s students and staff alike were proud to host Secretary Clinton and President Obama on their 2010 visit to India.

Although challenges in urban India often seem insurmountable, the optimism of Xaverites is infectious. Despite pressures to get ahead in rapidly rising India and the elite name recognition of a Xavier’s degree, most students have been genuinely touched by the Jesuit ideas of inclusion, justice, and diversity. For many, their years at St. Xavier’s College have shaped them into discerning citizens. St. Xavier’s is a place to experience inward development through attentive, intentional curiosity and dynamism along with the importance of the outward gaze through reflection beyond the self. In reality, not all students will be humanitarians. But it is the hope of the community at St. Xavier’s that students do not leave with a narrow worldview. Instead, the baby eagles are expected to fly out of the St. Xavier’s nest and into greater society with purpose and perspective. Because of its innovative programs, dedicated professors, and holistic commitment to social justice, St. Xavier’s College will continue to shape the future of Mumbai, India, and maybe even the world.

Notes
4 St. Xavier’s College Magazine 1950-1951 p.83
INTERVIEW EXCERPTS

A discussion with Father Frazer Mascarenhas, S.J
Jesuit Priest and Principal, St. Xavier’s College

May 24, 2011

An alumnus of St. Xavier’s High School, Dr. Frazer joined St. Xavier’s College and secured a B.A in Sociology. After joining the Society of Jesus, he earned his M.A. in Sociology from Pune University. He has taught at St. Xavier’s College from 1988 and became Principal in October 2003. He also studied at Loyola University, Chicago and earned his Ph.D. from Mumbai University. His thesis focused on the indigenous people of India – the adivasis, and it attempted to make a contribution to the literature on their distinctive cultural identity. In addition, he has served on numerous education committees and initiatives, including a current term on a Steering Committee of the Planning Commission of India, to recommend allocation of finance for Higher and Technical Education, during the 12th Five Year Plan of the Government of India.

What purpose does the Social Involvement Program serve?

When a student chooses St. Xavier’s College, they choose Jesuit education because they trust us as good educators with perspectives on faith and justice and centuries of experience. We teach these perspectives in an academically excellent environment. The Jesuit aim is an “all around formation” of every aspect of the human person. The Jesuit education comes as a package and social justice is an expected value for students to understand. That’s why we started the mandatory Social Involvement Program. It is designed to expose our students to the harsh realities of the lives of the poor....Jesuits generally believe that when the heart is touched by direct action, the mind
is challenged to change. This is our hope for students in the Social Involvement Program.

What are the core values you try to illustrate to your students?

First, we encourage excellence. We don't restrict excellence to the academic, but instead believe one should strive for excellence in all areas including the social, cultural, and spiritual spheres. The second value we deeply believe in is justice. Our country badly needs justice. Third, we encourage a quest for the divine. Our students often have their own religious commitments better understood after dialoguing with their peers of other faiths. They have a deepened understanding of their own religion.

What are the greatest challenges facing Mumbai?

The greatest challenges present for Mumbai and greater India are alleviating the economic and social disparities. We are told now is a time of great affluence in the rise of India and China. However, the country is in danger of being torn into those benefiting from this development and those who are the victims. Another challenge is the violence that results from these groups being frustrated. We have a deepening civil war and something must be done. The willingness of the Central government is there now where it wasn't before. The National Advisory Council under Sonia Gandhi features some great thinkers like Jean Dreze and Aruna Roy, which gives me some hope. I truly believe we need to reduce some of the demographic divides so that we can have a grand future human resource. In terms of intelligence, we are second to none. We have made great contributions to the American economy and the global economy. It is now time for India to turn back to its own citizens.

Anthony Dias is a Jesuit Priest of the Province of Mumbai. He obtained his law degree and his Ph.D. while studying for the priesthood. He has been closely associated with peoples’ movements. At present he heads a research organization (Xavier Institute of Social Research, XISR) that deals with the rights of the displaced, the denotified and nomadic tribes, distress migration, environmental protection, climate change, and mitigation and management of disasters.

How did you join the Society of Jesus?

The spirit is present everywhere. That is when my interreligious frontier broadened and expanded. Christianity is one religion among several in India and while it offers a lot, I realized that other faiths, too, have lessons for all Indians. We must be open to receive what they have to offer. I felt this realization enriched my life as a Jesuit. My encounters with other religions and other people broadened and deepened my own spiritually and Jesuit identity.

My students come from many departments, seeking awareness of who [others really are. Lakshman Gai-kwad who is this? said, “Father, I do not know any college or university anywhere that offers a course on denotified tribes.” As a mark of his appreciation, he comes and lectures and helps our students. Other colleges and universities come to our center to do research. We are beginning to have more access to policy makers, government, and bureaucrats as they read our research. It is our hope that feelings for the people arise and sensitivity for the plight of the people will grow. I believe that awareness, outreach, and research can mean that their lot can improve their livelihood.

What does being a Jesuit mean?

Being a Jesuit means having the desire to live for others without compromising my own need to become a better person. The overwhelming desire is to reach out to other people, to transform society, even while transforming myself. It is not that I’m perfect and I want to fix society. I am training myself; I am building my own capacities, and my own self-understand-
ing. Only then can I change society. It is like Mahatma Gandhi’s famous saying, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” It is a very beautiful way Gandhi has put it.

How do I change society? The situation of the denotified tribes is terrible. I can change it only through awareness. I can inspire people to be aware, to contribute to the cause. I see change happening, even if it is incremental. It is a very clear concept. Evolutionary changes can have a revolutionary change on society. The thing in India, the tradition, is that many people do very quiet work, amazing work. It is not noticed. Being useful to others also requires a commitment to self. The older spirituality was about killing yourself to help others. I think it is important to love yourself first so that you can love others. Loving doesn’t mean in a narcissistic manner, it is about taking care of yourself and finding balance.

A discussion with Angelo Menezes
Professor of Economics, St. Xavier’s College

May 31, 2011

Dr. Angelo Menezes is currently Associate Professor of Economics at St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai. An alumnus of St. Xavier’s College and Gold Medalist in Economics for topping the Mumbai University at the B.A. and M.A. Exams, Angelo earned his Ph.D. from Mumbai University with the thesis “Urban Poverty, with special reference to the Rag Pickers in Mumbai.” Angelo trained as a Jesuit Scholastic for five years. Angelo is involved with guiding many students in a variety of economic projects and considers himself “passionate about making economics meaningful and effective for the masses, especially the poor.”

What was the Jesuit influence on you, in the past and now?

When I went into the Order, I was interested in working for the forgotten and the downtrodden. I was not religious though. I didn’t like being bound by the text, or having to say a certain prayer at a certain time. I believe that there is a God and He is almighty. I just didn’t like the requirement of using the pattern of someone else to reach God. I wanted to make my own conversations. I don’t believe in sects. In the society, there were lots of Jesuits who were so inspiring, dedicated to giving up the best things of life and not breaking down. These are things I carry with me as my stamina giver. During the novitiate, we were made to spend a month without an identity on the road—living out poverty in reality. Due to this I understand the pangs of hunger. The poor would share whatever little they had when we asked them for alms—this was not the experience we had with better-off families.

What are the greatest challenges facing Mumbai and India? How can Xavier’s play a role?

The current quest for the beautification of Mumbai is a quest to get rid of poverty by getting rid of the poor. That is the biggest challenge: how do you ensure that it is a development for all? The challenge for India is to make policies that will not be subservient to financial powers. Unfortunately a lot of our business policy makers have been co-opted by the system. It is very difficult for Indian business makers to realize that even if a small section of society is missing out, it is a cause of concern. There is a lot of shifting from rural financial to urban financial with globalization. We have city development programs that divert funds from rural development at a tremendous cost of people being displaced and pushed out.

What can Xavier’s do as an autonomous institute? I think Xavier’s has to be openly involved with these activities that will counter such anti-poor measures. I think too many of the staff may feel that these activities are controversial and they are not conscious of the connections to their own lives. The young people will not foster a movement for the poor if the staff does not motivate them. I accompany my students when they work with the poor. More and more of the staff need to get involved in this. We are caught up with creating academic programs. We are concerned about creating students to interpret theories, not challenge theories. Students can quote and rephrase as experts and good talkers.
A discussion with Abhay Mital, Undergraduate Student, St. Xavier’s College
May 21, 2011

Can you tell me about your Social Involvement Program (SIP) experience?

I am mentoring 3 or 4 children at this NGO called Youth for Youth in Bandra. Youth for Youth is an organization associated with the Jesuits. It is an after-school program for kids with disadvantaged background. It is not necessarily at the grassroots level, but the children are in government schools and need the extra support. The kind of work I did gave me insight into the lives of these children. It was a bit difficult for me to connect with them in the beginning, but they eventually opened up to me. It was hard for me to work with the 7th grade syllabus. During the course of SIP I realized it is not so much about poverty…they although they lived in a different background than me, they were so vibrant. They gave me a sense of gratefulness for what I have. I really am happy to see how they have progressed. For me, it was more about giving them a sense of skill than imparting knowledge. It helped me a lot as well. I noticed that the teachers emphasized rote learning and memorization over learning how to do well in life. I used make it a point that I would give a once-a-week session around a particular social issue. I realized although they had a basic understanding, they weren’t really into it. I thought it was important to teach the basics about topics like HIV and hygiene. I ended up teaching them how to debate. There is enormous benefit in having a civilized discussion with someone else.

What’s next for you?

My service work has become an integral part of my life. I’ve realized when I do it, I’m happy. It is not a matter of compulsion. A number of my friends participating are concerned about the SIP hours. For me, the reflections and the hours gave me quite a lot. Definitely it will be taking a backseat once I start working. Finding the balance between my work and these sorts of opportunities will be a challenge. But if I can find time to hang out with my friends, why can’t I be involved in work that benefits society?

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Vivien Amonkar
Head of the Departments of Microbiology and Biotechnology at St. Xavier’s College

Sangeetha Chavan
Professor of Microbiology and Biotechnology at St. Xavier’s College

Fleur D’Souza
Principal of the Arts, History Department Head, St. Xavier’s College

Neha Deshmukh
Undergraduate Student at St. Xavier’s College

Anthony Dias
Jesuit Priest of the Province of Mumbai, Professor of Sociology

Neil Maheshwari
Undergraduate Student at St. Xavier’s College

Frazer Mascarenhas
Father and Principal of St. Xavier’s College

Agnelo Menezes
Associate Professor of Economics at St. Xavier’s College

Abhay Mital
Undergraduate student at St. Xavier’s College

Fr. Terence Quadros
Father and Director of the Counseling Centre at St. Xavier’s College

Rajendra Shinde
Professor of Botany at St. Xavier’s College

Periyanayagi Subramaniam
Professor of Mass Media at St. Xavier’s College
Overview
Conor Finnegan is an American Studies major and an English minor in Georgetown College, with a certificate in Islam. Originally from Long Island, Conor traveled to Johannesburg, South Africa in May 2011 to study the Jesuit Institute's “Believing in Creation and Evolution” program. A partnership with the Origins Centre at the University of the Witwatersrand, the program aims to teach high school students and their teachers how to bring together their faith and modern science. In addition to this nexus of religion, education, and social justice, he examined how changing religious beliefs to fit with modern science alters a person’s sense of self and how the history of apartheid has affected science and religious education in South Africa.

Partner Institution: Jesuit Institute of South Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa
The Jesuit Institute of South Africa is dedicated to promoting critical reflection and debate on issues of social justice that affect modern society from a Catholic perspective. The institute works with faith-based communities and provides opportunities for church members to study subjects such as psychology, theology, philosophy, and applied ethics. The institute believes that, with a deeper understanding of their faith, people will be able to contribute more fully to the dialogue that surrounds issues both within the Catholic Church and outside of it. In addition, the Centre for Ignatian Spirituality, which forms part of the institute, hosts retreat programs and provides a space for spiritual reflection. The institute works with all sectors of South African society and promotes a multi-disciplinary, integrative approach to its programs, encouraging an open dialogue among different academic departments and among the Catholic clergy, its laity, and people of other faiths. It currently offers educational and training courses, hosts workshops, conferences, and retreats, and provides consultation services to church-based and non-religious non-governmental organizations. Motivated by the Catholic faith and Jesuit values, the institute is committed to promoting reflection and dialogue on important social and religious concerns and seeks to engage all who are interested in creating a more just and equal world.
The Church’s Challenge: Science, Education, and the Jesuit Institute of South Africa

Introduction

In summer 2010, the world watched in awe as the Republic of South Africa, less than two decades after the fall of the apartheid regime, came together across racial, class, and religious lines to host the FIFA World Cup. At the same time, the country enjoyed one of the fastest growing economies in the world: With a GDP that peaked at 7.10% in December 2006, it was invited to join the elite BRICS, a conglomerate of fast-developing countries that consisted of Brazil, Russia, India, and China. In the face of such celebration, however, the country marked another important, albeit more unsettling, milestone: South Africa reached the second largest degree of inequality in the world, according to statistics compiled by the CIA. Even earthquake-devastated Haiti and AIDS-ravaged Lesotho had a smaller Gini index, the measurement of a country’s gap in the distribution of family income. As one study put it, a growing pool of data shows that “South Africa is now the most consistently unequal country in the world.”

The causes and effects of this rising inequality permeate into the rest of South African society—declining wages, rising urbanization, skyrocketing unemployment, high rates of illiteracy, one of the lowest life expectancies worldwide, a dangerous crime rate, and a strong wave of xenophobic sentiment, to name just a few of the country’s problems. To combat such plights and the structural inequalities that fuel them, the Society of Jesus founded a local chapter in South Africa in 2005. The Jesuit Institute of South Africa works with men and women from all walks of life and areas of society to “provide training and encourage debate on current social and religious issues from a faith perspective and to stimulate critical reflection, research and dialogue.”

This report examines one of the Jesuit Institute’s most innovative programs, “Believing in Creation and Evolution.” In particular, the report focuses on the program’s history and development, and the challenges it confronts now and will confront in the future. The report draws on eighteen different interviews and discussions with more than thirty individuals, including the program’s develop-
ers and lecturers, students and teachers who have experienced it firsthand, and a variety of educators and policymakers involved in science and religion curriculum.

“Believing in Creation and Evolution” is a two-hour lecture program that aims to teach young adults in secondary schools around Johannesburg that science and religion do not necessarily oppose one another and that they can believe in both the theory of evolution and their Christian faith. A joint project between the Jesuit Institute and the Origins Centre at Witwatersrand University, the lecture is delivered by an evolutionary scientist and a Jesuit priest, who each speak for about an hour and then take questions together at the end. In particular, the scientist—most often Dr. Merrill van der Walt—lays out in plain terms for students, or learners, as they are known in South Africa, the science behind evolution. The priest—either Fr. Anthony Egan or Fr. Peter Knox, both from the Jesuit Institute—then tells the Church’s side of the story, explaining how it has never opposed the theory, how the theory can fit into Catholic dogma, and how students can square it with their own beliefs, particularly the words of the Bible.

Those words mean a lot to many South Africans. According to both Dr. van der Walt and Fr. Anthony, 64% of Christian South Africans believe in Biblical literalism, regarding as true and factual the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. While interviewees debated the source of this belief, the fact remains that its prevalence speaks to some deeper issues that the Jesuit Institute is bravely trying to tackle.

Background

In order to best understand the current dynamics at work in South African education and religion, it is important to note the country’s complex history, for as Fr. Anthony noted, “The history of South African education is a history of discrimination.” The nationalist government that came to power in 1948 and began legislating the apartheid system “based its entire political philosophy on what was called Christian Nationalism.”

A thread of Calvinism that was born out of Afrikaner culture, it became the dogmatic justification for the apartheid regime. Conservative and authoritarian, Christian Nationalism asserted that South Africa was the fatherland of the Afrikaans people, who were chosen by God to protect and order all creation. According to former “Bible education” teacher Rene Ferguson, who taught under the regime, “It was very Biblically based.”

The tenets of Christian Nationalism penetrated the classroom as well. Every academic subject was presented through this ideological lens—a white, Christian perspective that “supported racism” and made “absolutely no reference to anybody who wasn’t white.” For these non-whites, at first education was virtually nonexistent because “the assumption was that they were all going to be miners or farmers.” Eventually, the government developed the Bantu education system for black communities, but only once the country developed a need for semi-literate workers in factories and offices. Still, the idea was to avoid educating people to levels of literacy that would enable them to think for themselves or challenge the status quo.

After the demise of the apartheid regime and the first free democratic elections in 1994, the new government led by the African National Congress ordered a total restructuring of school curriculum that removed all forms of discrimination. Because the religious education was notoriously tied to the National Party’s regime, any mention of religion was initially barred from the classroom. A few years and two committees later, religion was again integrated into the curriculum “because religion is such an integral part of the lives of many different South Africans.” At the same time, committees reworked the science education as well, and as the country developed in leaps and bounds after 1994, the breadth and scope of science curriculum expanded rapidly. Still, it was only in 2008 that “evolution, biology were introduced for the first time.” Given evolution’s novelty in the classroom, many South Africans, especially in the older generations, consider it a threat at best and an evil at worst.

Important to note is the fact that the most influential characteristic of education under the apartheid regime was not its religious character, but the structural violence of its racist regime. The lack of a proper education system for non-whites had an enormous impact on the overwhelming majority of South Africans, with repercussions that continue to reverberate even today. As Fr. Pe-
ter Knox noted, “That just hasn’t fallen away as of 1994 when apartheid officially ended...there are ramifications that will carry on for generations in terms of educational funding, the preparedness of teachers to teach what they actually should know, in terms of the availability of good teachers.”11 Structurally, socially, and even psychologically, the country has yet to truly recover from the violent racism of the apartheid era.

**Motivating Factors**

While several ideas were discussed in interviews, four overarching themes offer an explanation for such a high rate of Biblical literalism. First and most often, many cited the poor education system, a burdensome relic from the apartheid days. Raymond Perrier, director of the Jesuit Institute, detailed the problem: “The vast majority of people in this country have got a level of education which isn’t really much beyond primary school... Even for [those who graduate high school], the level of conceptual thought that they feel comfortable with is relatively low... That is then exacerbated by the fact that we have whole hordes of Christian leaders...who have either a relatively low level of education, or...they’ve managed to complete degrees without really challenging some of the things they’re given, so it’s an education model which reinforces a sense that you believe what you’re told rather than asking questions and challenging.”

Dr. Merrill van der Walt blamed the illiteracy resulting from a poor education system for the fact that much of the population consumes these ideas without questioning: “It’s far simpler to adhere to a literal interpretation. It makes a lot more sense to say that God made one man, and then He took the rib, and a woman came, and there’s an apple. These are things that people don’t have to grapple with.” Others, like Alex Parkinson, a lecturer for the program from the Origins Centre, cited the dire poverty: “When you’re in a poverty mindset, you tend to focus on things such as survival—obtaining food, getting money, getting work—and to spend time to sit down for two seconds to think, ‘Well, should I be examining the Bible literally?’ I don’t think that that ever crosses their mind.”12 Still others believe it is a racial issue: “There is a deep resentment, particularly among black South Africans, that we were descended from apes,” said Fr. Anthony. “To say we descended from apes fits into a lot of racist stereotypes that black South Africans are still very conscious of...[because they] were not considered to be fully human by many whites who ran the show.”13

**“By Means of Public Preaching, Lectures, and Any Other Ministration Whatsoever”**

Whatever the reasons, the Jesuit Institute and the Origins Centre together stepped into the void to address this previously unexplored problem. It began in early 2010 when Dr. van der Walt approached her old university chaplain Fr. Peter Knox to discuss a proposal she had developed. She had been working at very impoverished schools as a science and math teacher when she saw how religion was becoming an impediment to intellectual growth and education. “I found that such literal understanding of things is like looking at the world through a tiny sliver,” she said, and that was a problem she wanted to address head on. Within months, the two organizations crafted a program where students would spend a day at the Origins Centre museum that was capped by a joint lecture by Dr. van der Walt and one of the Jesuit priests. After its first year, they felt hampered by the logistics; bringing students to the Centre was difficult to organize and fund, especially for the “previously disadvantaged” schools that needed the program the most. It was then that the idea of a traveling lecture program developed. For a small honorarium, the program would visit schools in the Johannesburg area—from the elite and wealthy to the poor and “previously disadvantaged.”
The program is part academic lecture, part colloquial engagement. Lecturers try to “talk in terms of things that make sense” to secondary school students, “things that are more relevant in terms of what they experience.”  

In that sense, the speakers ask questions, use visual aids, and interact with students to get “them to help frame the discussion and see how it develops.” Having an understanding of the audience as well as the goal is crucial, too. Because of the enormous gaps in education, one has to “use your audience in the beginning to gauge their level of understanding” and measure what kind of foundation in science and religion one is working with. 

The clear communication of respect for the vast range of beliefs in the classroom—from Zulu ancestral worship to staunch atheism to Biblical literalism—is essential. According to Dr. van der Walt, the lecturer must know that, “Your role is not to change their way of thinking, but for them to just open their minds a bit and see.”

For Dr. van der Walt and others, the opening of the mind serves as the guiding principle for the program. “Evolutionary theory is a theory; it’s not vital that everyone knows it,” she explained. “But it’s the principle behind it, of accepting it, that can help you as a person… because no matter how dire your situation, whatever you learn in life cannot be taken away from you… that is the greatest idea behind it.” Dr. Adam Yates, an evolutionary scientist at Wits University unaffiliated with the program, expanded on this idea, noting: “It’s not just teaching evolution. You need to get more fundamental than that. You need to teach how to think critically, how to evaluate evidence… to go forth and find out knowledge for yourself, how to evaluate things, to understand.”

To Raymond Perrier, such ideas have a profound impact across the rest of society as well; in his opinion, spoon-fed strict interpretations of the Bible could also lead to wholesale consumption of political narratives. “The lack of a deep, sophisticated, conceptual education is indeed a social injustice, a form of poverty, and… not just because it leaves people culturally impoverished, but it actually makes them politically impoverished. So I would suggest that people’s failure to challenge, say, Biblical literalism would be tied with their failure to challenge some of the political mythologies that, say, the ANC benefits from.” Beyond politics, however, the program’s doctrine, and its greatest success, remains the ability to impart knowledge and, by extension, dignity; above all else, this is what really lifts people from “poverty,” by empowering them to think for themselves.

The Challenges Ahead

Despite its successes and aspirations, “Believing in Evolution and Creation” also has its challenges and limitations. The problems—as identified by the program’s administrators, attendees, or both—fall into three broad categories: time, the lectures themselves, and sustainability.

In and of themselves, creation and evolution could serve as sources of endless debate. Asking two people to communicate how these belief systems are compatible in the course of a two-hour visit is a daunting task, to say the least. Several students expressed a feeling of being short-
changed by that time constraint, especially on the religion aspect of the lecture. Harry Moyo, a twelfth grade student at De la Salle Holy Cross College, succinctly summarized the issue: “He [Fr. Anthony Egan] needed more time.” The biggest temporal issue, however, may actually be the final fifteen minutes “because forty-five minutes for a talk might be long enough, but fifteen minutes for questions generally isn’t.” Many students discussed how irrelevant questions interfered with the discussion, leading it to incomplete and unsatisfying ends. Rather than attempting to answer enormous questions in the course of a few minutes, the lecturers might consider answering only those questions that maintained a focus on the issues at hand surrounding faith and science.

A related issue is what St. Teresa’s School religious education teacher Tracey Adams called a lack of “purpose and direction” in the second half of the program. Some of her students voiced similar opinions: “I didn’t understand the goal of his talk.” “His presentation didn’t really make a lot of sense.” “It didn’t really feel like he had an argument.” “It just informed me more on the questions I was already asking and didn’t really give me any answers to it or any solutions.”

To a certain extent, however, confusion is precisely the result that the Jesuit Institute aims for. Director Raymond Perrier explains, “By this age, young people are coping with ambiguity…and so it’s okay in that environment to introduce for those who do believe in God a further level of…complexity. Complexity is a good thing. We shouldn’t encourage people to believe in simple answers to complex questions.” To him and others, the confusion leads to the kind of questioning and opening of the mind that the program desires. The tension lies in different expectations—the Institute sees confusion as a positive, while the students and teachers “think priests should answer their questions, and then they should take” those answers to heart. It is precisely this tendency of deferral to authority, however, that the Institute hopes to dismantle in favor of a culture of questioning, which will ultimately lead to deeper insight and stronger conviction.

A gap in theological understanding also lies at the heart of this tension. According to some students and teachers, the Jesuit Institute’s lecturers operate on a level that is too high for some students. “It made sense in his mind because it’s what he’s been studying his whole life,” said one student, “but then for us, we were like, ‘Wait, what?’” While a certain amount of confusion is part of the goal, students’ bafflement often results from the lofty level of theology that lecturers engage in, rather than an exercise in intellectual stimulation. St. Teresa’s religious education teacher Tracey Adams recounted how the religion lecturer told her students, “The Bible is not a historical book,” “And I know where he was coming from because I do understand that…but [it] was a confusing factor rather than contributing to the whole” of the presentation. Some students also noted that the lecturers often mentioned dense ideas, only to gloss over them if they explained the concepts at all. Another De la Salle Holy Cross religious education teacher faced a similar issue when the religion lecturer told her students that the story of Adam and Eve was a myth. “To the kids, it must mean ‘fairy tale’…That was never explained…It was just kind of dumped on them: ‘Adam and Eve never happened: that wasn’t true.’”

To their credit, the Jesuit Institute does recognize the issue. As Fr. Anthony remarked, “We are the products of our education,” and for Raymond, Fr. Peter, and Fr. Anthony, their education took place at the university level in prestigious M.A. and Ph.D. programs. Trying to bridge the divide between professional academics and youth in a country with “low levels of education [and a] very unsophisticated understanding of religion” serves as a huge obstacle. Raymond Perrier acknowledges the problem: “It’s a real challenge, and it’s worth pointing out that this is the only work we do with that age of people, and it’s the first work that we’ve done with school-age children…When we started doing it, I did challenge the team about whether we had the skills to do it.” Perhaps more experience with young people would help the religion lecturers better position the talk for their audience without losing any of the program’s challenging content.

The final issue the program faces is sustainability. However, the Institute again knows its limits and con-
continues to work tirelessly to overcome them. As Fr. Peter freely admitted, “Our obstacle is our own time limitation—we can’t be doing this forever.” In a separate interview, Fr. Anthony advised, “We need to expand—we need more people who can do the project.” At the moment, the logistics are constraining. Only five people currently serve as lecturers, a fact that occasionally makes personal schedules an impediment. The program is scheduled during one to two weeks a year, and schools can only host the program during that time. In addition, the program needs an invitation and requires an honorarium in order to visit a school—two self-limiting stipulations that have largely restricted its implementation to wealthier, private Catholic schools.

Walking Upright: The Steps Going Forward

In response to these challenges and others, however, the Jesuit Institute and the Origins Centre are working towards innovative solutions that will carry the spirit of the project forward to reach an even wider audience. Among the most popular ideas is what Fr. Anthony calls the “multiplying factor”: “One Jesuit should help to train a whole bunch of other people” so that the pool of people involved and educated grows ever more expansive. Whether this involves the development of textbooks and other materials to train teachers or working with teacher training programs in higher education to develop specific curriculum remains to be seen. Dr. van der Walt has developed a similar idea, albeit one that is a bit more creative—a mobile museum. Dubbed “The Bone Shaker,” the converted school bus would house a variety of tools to “showcase and interpret paleontology, paleoanthropology, and archaeology for the public” in an interactive and innovative way. Traveling around the country, the mobile museum would provide greater access to much-needed, innovative education to poorer communities. According to Dr. van der Walt, the project may also take the form of a one-time storage pod, given to a particular community for them to operate as a local museum that educates and generates profit.

Despite the variety of future models, from lectures to museums, the fundamental idea remains the same: education as the key to fighting poverty. Dr. Merrill van der Walt describes how it fights financial poverty: “Poor education in South Africa is a serious constraint on improved rates of inclusive economic growth, which is vital to combat poverty” and the precipitous divides of inequality. In addition, education also fights spiritual poverty. As Ann Cameron, a professor at the Science Teaching and Learning Centre at the University of the Witwatersrand, asserted, “The more education you have, and the more you are able to think at higher levels, that is going to open up how you engage with your religious understanding” and allow you to live more deeply in your personal faith and with your scientific understanding.

By teaching others to challenge the often docilely digested dogmas on both sides of the science-religion debate and to come to understand how such a dichotomy is misdirected, the Jesuit Institute of South Africa and the Origins Centre at Witwatersrand University are changing the lives of students, teachers, and others, one lecture at a time.

Notes

1 http://www.tradingeconomics.com/south-africa/gdp-growth-annual
3 http://dev.absol.co.za/Presidency/docs/reports/15year_review/social/economic_growth.pdf
5 Rene Ferguson, interview
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Raymond Perrier, interview
9 Rene Ferguson interview
10 Ann Cameron interview
11 Fr. Peter Knox interview
12 Alex Parkinson interview
13 Fr. Anthony Egan interview
14 Alex Parkinson interview
15 Raymond Perrier
16 Alex Parkinson interview
17 Adam Yates interview
18 De la Salle Holy Cross Students Interview
19 Alex Parkinson interview
20 Tracey Adams interview
21 Raymond Perrier interview
22 De la Salle Holy Cross Students Interview; a note: One of the St. Matthew’s students expressed a similar sentiment, saying she just wanted someone to tell her what to believe—“I would rather wanted them to tell me which one of them to believe in, because really now, they made us all on the fence.” (Lerato, St. Matthew’s).
23 Samantha, De la Salle Students interview
24 De la Salle Teacher interview
25 Fr. Anthony Egan interview
26 Raymond Perrier interview
27 Fr. Peter Knox interview
28 Fr. Anthony Egan interview
Interview Excerpts

A discussion with Alex Parkinson, Masters Candidate, Berhard Price Institute for Palaeontological Research, University of the Witwatersrand Lecturer, the “Believing in Creation and Evolution” Project

May 26, 2011

Alex Parkinson spent seven years working in the corporate world as a financial auditor before following his dream, going back to school, and earning his honors degree in paleontology. He is now on the next step of that journey at Wits University, studying for his Masters and 12-18 months away from beginning his PhD program. Part of that study has involved Wits’s world-renowned Origins Centre, and so when Dr. van der Walt was faced with a last-minute scheduling conflict, she trusted Mr. Parkinson to fill in. Given his mastery of the science portion of the talk and how well he works with young adults, he has been a part of the program ever since as a lecturer.

How do you see social injustices, like poverty or lack of access to education, maybe the legacy of apartheid, influencing a person’s belief in Biblical literalism, if at all?

I think access to education is probably the most influential thing because when you go through an educational system, it teaches you to challenge things that are put in front of you, to ask questions and seek your own answers. If you don’t have access to education or access to people in your realm that have that similar thought pattern, you’re not actively going to follow that. So if, for example, your parents don’t challenge anything, your grandparents don’t challenge anything in a rural environment, then you’re not taught to challenge those things yourself that are put on your plate. So I think access to education is one thing. Does our past political history influence it? I’m sure it does in some way. I think it’s an indirect influence. I don’t think that it influences with intent. I think that poverty stops people from worrying about bigger questions. When you’re in a poverty mindset, you tend to focus on things such as survival—obtaining food, getting money, getting work. And to spend time to sit down for two seconds to think, “Well, should I be examining the Bible literally?” I don’t think that that ever crosses their mind. You hear the story, so you listen to the story and you believe it because you’re actually worried about getting food in your stomach, not the theoretical justice behind what you’re being told.

Looking at this particular program, which seems to be the only one addressing this issue so far, what do
you think educators around the world could learn from it and take away?

I think that if you bring two institutions together that are each known for their excellence—the Jesuit Institute is recognized religiously as being a fundamental institute of learning and the Origins Centre as a museum that is recognized as one of the groundbreaking museums in this country—and making these institutions not fight each other, but instead form partnerships and work together for a common cause and a common understanding, that is ultimately what the world can learn. It's that institutions with very, very distinct objectives don't necessarily have to fight each other but can form very groundbreaking partnerships to expand and enrich the lives of people, to enrich the knowledge of people, and ultimately to change perceptions.

A discussion with Raymond Perrier, Director, Jesuit Institute of South Africa

May 21, 2011

Years ago, one would have found Raymond Perrier walking down Madison Avenue in New York City, working in marketing and advertisement. And only a few years ago, one would have found him in the all-black Jesuit uniform, complete with a white collar and working in a refugee camp in Uganda. But today, Mr. Perrier—a transplant from the U.K.—heads the Jesuit Institute of South Africa as its lay director, a position that fuels his passion for education and brings together a lifetime of skills across various fields. As director, he leads some individual projects while also managing the institute as a whole and working to promote its mission out in the community. He holds a Masters in philosophy and theology from New College Oxford, a Masters in Philosophy from Heythrop College of the University of London, and an MSc in human rights from the London School of Economics.

64% of South Africans are Biblical literalists. What do you think are the major reasons behind that Biblical literalism, what drives that idea in so many people in this country?

My suspicion is it’s a lack of education across the board. The vast majority of people in this country have got a level of education, which isn’t really much beyond primary school, although an increasing number of people graduate from high school. Even then, the level of conceptual thought that they feel comfortable with is relatively low, and that’s still only a minority of people who graduate from high school. That is then exacerbated by the fact that we have a whole hordes of Christian leaders—pastors in Evangelical churches and even priests in the Catholic Church—who have either a relatively low level of education or if they have ticked the boxes and completed diplomas or completed degrees, they’ve managed to do so without really challenging some of the things they’re given. So it’s an education model which reinforces a sense that you believe what you’re told rather than asking questions and challenging.

Are there factors that influence this poor education, which seems to be found across the country? Why is the education here so poorly done?

There’s a huge racial issue about education, so anyone non white and over the age of 30 would have grown up in the era of Bantu education, where there was a separate and considerably poorer education for blacks and coloreds and Indians, to use the South African terminology. But I would suggest that the poor quality of education actually also affected white communities as well in that part of what made sure apartheid went unchallenged for so long was that the white community was also given an education which was about being told what to think rather than being encouraged to think for themselves. So wherever you were, and this is often said in relation to apartheid, everyone was a victim, not just non-white people, because white people similarly grew up in a very patriarchal, a very authoritarian world, and of course a very Calvinistic world. It was deeply influenced by the Dutch Reform Church. So people over a certain age will have grown up with that, which means that the majority of people who are religious leaders today have grown up with that kind of education, and therefore the parents of the kinds of kids who are in school today have grown up with that sort of education.

In discussing race and a lack of access to quality edu-
cation, can we call this a social justice issue?

Yes, I think we can. I think lack of deep, sophisticated, conceptual education is indeed a social injustice, a form of poverty. And it’s a form of poverty not just because it leaves people culturally impoverished, but it actually makes them politically impoverished. So I would suggest that people’s failure to challenge, say, Biblical literalism would be tied with their failure to challenge some of the political mythologies that, say, the ANC benefits from. The ANC benefits from a population that is relatively passive and relatively accepting of some of the claims that it makes, evidenced by its very high turn out, the very high votes it gets in elections. I don’t think it’s unconnected to an education system that encourages people to shut up and repeat verbatim rather than to challenge.

How do you think that this belief disadvantages people in other parts of their lives, if it does disadvantage them at all?

Well, we see this a lot in employability. Employers complain all the time that the kind of people who emerge from schools, even though they passed their exams, even though they’ve got their “matric”—as it’s called—even if they’ve passed through university, they actually come into business and come into organizations without an ability to think for themselves. So they will follow a process but they won’t recognize how they make the process more efficient, they won’t recognize times when the process is actually getting in the way of good delivery. Some would say that there is actually an element of capitalism that benefits from a system in which you have a lot of people who are good processors rather than who are likely to challenge. But of course, in an increasingly knowledge economy, that becomes a real source of poverty. There might be a parallel to draw with the way that education developed here. Originally black people had almost no education at all because the assumption was that they were all going to be miners or farmer workers, and therefore they didn’t even need to be literate. The point at which education was extended in the form of Bantu education to black communities was when it was seen that actually you needed people who could be clerks in banks and clerks in offices and had a degree of literacy, but not too much so that they wouldn’t challenge the status quo. I think we’re still living out of that kind of model and we haven’t yet gotten to an education stage where encouraging people to think is seen as something which is a virtue not just for the individual, but a virtue for the economy.

What do you think the program does best? What do you see as its greatest successes?

I think the best thing it does is ask the question and point to an answer which is not a straightforward answer. So if we go into a group and at the beginning of the session, they’re really clear about what they believe and at the end of the session, they’re not clear about what they believe, I would actually regard that as a success because by and large if they’re clear about what they believe, what they believe is something that we would actually say is wrong. They’re either believing in a one-dimensional view of science or a one-dimensional view of Biblical creation. And that’s why I think we have to do it with the age group we’re doing it with, which is effectively 16, 17, 18. I think any younger than that and you end up confusing people and you don’t give them a sense that ambiguity is a good thing—then they’re worse off than when they started. By this age, young people are coping with ambiguity, they’re already asking questions about their own religion, so they’re already challenging whether or not they should go to church, some of them are challenging whether or not they should believe in God, and so it’s ok in that environment to introduce for those who do believe in God a further level of ambiguity. I think complexity is a good thing. We shouldn’t encourage people to believe in simple answers to complex questions.

I think the pushback against an idea like that though is that you are only there for two hours and with grade 12 students. For example, you go in there, you give them these ideas, and they do become confused or questioning, things become ambiguous, and then a few months later they’ll graduate and they’ll be lost. Can you address this issue?

Well if I can quote John Stuart Mill, “Better to be a philosopher and miserable than a pig and happy.” Yes, they
will leave school and they may still have these questions unresolved. A lot of them will go on to university, and Witts, the big university in town, did a survey of students recently asking them if they believe in creation or evolution. And what was really striking was that none of the people who replied said, “The question is wrong, creation and evolution are not alternatives.” So there’s a whole group, a whole generation of people who went to university thinking they either had to believe in creation or evolution and weren’t even able to say to the questioner, “Actually, you’ve asked me the wrong question. It’s like asking me do I prefer apple juice or chocolate. So I would rather that we have young people who weren’t sure than have young people who are absolutely convinced that they believed in evolution and therefore couldn’t believe in a creator God or be absolutely convinced in a 7-day creation God and therefore couldn’t believe in evolution, because I think both of those are faulty positions and they should be challenged.

A discussion with Melusa Mayuso, Lerato Tlotetsi, Nathi Gamede, Lungile Skhosana, Mapaseka Msibi; High School Students, St. Matthew’s Secondary School

May 25, 2011

St. Matthew’s Secondary School is a private, co-ed, and Catholic high school in Soweto, Johannesburg run by the Sisters of Mercy. It started in the mid-1930s as part of the Bantu education program and was nearly closed in 1953 when the Catholic Bishops Conference expressed its opposition to that national education system for blacks. It managed to survive the government’s withdrawal of funding, and in 1960 the Sisters took it over and grew the campus to include a pre-school, primary school, and secondary school. Melusa Mayuso, Lerato Tlotetsi, Nathi Gamede, Lungile Skhosana, and Mapaseka Msibi are all grade 12 students who did not sit through the Jesuit Institute’s current lecture, but rather attended an earlier iteration of the program where they traveled to the Origins Centre to explore the museum and listen to a talk by Dr. Merrill van der Walt and Fr. Peter Knox.

What were you religious beliefs before learning about evolution?

NATHI GAMEDE, GRADE 12: I come from a religious family. When I was brought up, we used to go to church every Sunday, for Good Friday, and stuff. Then there was a time when, around grade 7, I didn’t go to church, and then evolution started coming up, and I had my own religion, ok? So I created my own God, and now I’m starting to merge the two—evolution and the God that I believe in, coming up to make one thing.

What do you think is the relationship between religion and science?

NATHI: Well, I think they work hand in hand, you know, because the Bible tells you why you’re here, it doesn’t tell you how you came about. It doesn’t give you facts, like you came about, God made you—there are no facts in there. The science part tells you how you came about but doesn’t tell you why you’re here, but when you look at them together, I think it’s God and—I think there are two Gods: science is a God and God is a God—I think it’s a war or something like that.

In this country, though, a lot of people believe the story of creation actually happened. I’m not saying one way or
another that it did, but 64% of Christian South Africans take the story of creation literally, exactly as it happened in the Bible, which is something science disagrees with.

**Why do you think that that many people in this country in particular have that belief?**

NATHI: I would say they don’t know anything about evolution. I would say maybe 50% of the 64% don’t know anything about evolution, have never heard anything about evolution. They just see and hear people talking about, “Hey, they discovered a new skull—Mrs. Ples,” and whatever, and they don’t know anything: “What’s Mrs. Ples? Where did it come about?”

**So do you think maybe things are changing—that was all the old generation, and now that you guys are learning science, things will change?**

LERATO TSOTETSI, GRADE 12: I strongly agree with her. Slowly but surely, people are changing, we’re getting more and more into technology and science. It is actually concerning me, because I think that like when time goes by, we as black people are going to start forgetting about where we come from, our religion, and we’re going to start focusing more on the technological stuff, which is why I still believe that although there are still all these things, you just have to know where you come from to know where you’re going. So slowly but surely, people are starting to get into this whole technology and science, and they actually don’t realize the dangers of it as well because the more developed a country becomes, the more it produces more and more technology, and that is why we have such things as global warming and greenhouse effects and whatnot, so slowly but surely the world is deteriorating, but we have to look at that.

**What did you dislike about the program? What left you with questions? What didn’t you understand afterwards?**

LERATO: A thing we should think about is the people who were presenting to us, they’re only human, so I felt like there were more questions I had to ask, but then I thought it would be rather unfair to them because they don’t have all the answers. Like the one question I would’ve liked to ask them is that, ok, they’ve given us the scientific concept of it and the religious concept of it, so they won’t really make the decision for us, but then the question that I would’ve loved to ask is where do we really come from? You know, because they gave us facts, they gave us religion, but then they didn’t make the choice for us. I know it kind of sounds irrelevant, but I would rather have them tell me which one of them to believe in, because really now, they made us all on the fence. They gave us science and religion, and so it’s up to a person what to believe in. I just felt it would have been more factual and they would have explained it then, but then they’re only human like I said. They don’t know it all.
the mistake of being atheist, by taking a stance that they're right and everyone else is idiotic, and it closes doors—there's a refusal to understand the theory as a result. So I thought to myself for me, from a Catholic background and going into science this whole time, I always wondered what the Church's stance on it was, and you assume because the Church is so conservative in so many aspects—right down to forbidding the use of condoms—you would automatically assume that there is absolutely no way it would embrace any kind of evolutionary theory. So I then approached the Jesuit Institute on my own. What I had done long ago was realize you cannot not accept the theory of evolution; there's too much evidence. But I had never combined the two ways of thinking. One was religion, one was science, and never the two shall meet. And then I approached the Jesuit Institute and became friendly with Fr. Peter Knox and Fr. Anthony, and I was shocked to discover that the Church doesn't have the vaguest problem. In fact, it's never disagreed with the theory, and I thought, "Well, there are a vast number of Catholic school-going children in Hauteng [Province] alone, and never mind that, all their parents that go to mass every Sunday. And so I proposed to the Jesuit Institute that we let schools come here, I say what evolutionary theory is, and the idea was for the priest to say how it links because it's never been done before. It was a question that I never answered for myself, which I kept separate, and I learned close to the age of 40 that you could link the two, so it's been better for my faith anyway.

Fr. Anthony told me that in South Africa, 64% of the population believes in Biblical literalism. What do you think are the major reasons that drive that belief?

You'll find you have it in Africa, and you have the same thing in India: if people's lives become so dire, they become strongly religious because it offers a promise of something better later on. So you find that especially among the African population in South Africa, they are deeply religious, deeply devoted, and they all go to church on Sundays and sing and worship. But I think linked to the level of illiteracy, linked to the level of the low education standard, especially in the rural communities, it's far simpler to adhere to a literal interpretation. It makes a lot more sense to say that God made one man, and then He took the rib and a woman came and there's an apple. These are things that people don't have to grapple with, it's easy to understand, the message behind it's easier to understand, and the message that Christ spreads is a simple message. So I think that is the explanation as to why a majority are literalists. But also, you can think of how we have come from the dark ages of apartheid, where people were deeply hurt. There was a terrible sense of a superior race, which was what was propagated within the people for many, many generations. So what happens is that the concept—and it's a myth, of course, within the evolutionary theory—but the idea that people might have come from an ape is insulting. It is an insulting concept. The idea that you are made in the image of God and that God is good and great is far more a source of comfort. So there is huge antagonism toward accepting any kind of theory that is believed to say that they come from an ape ancestor. But it boils down to levels of ignorance, levels of illiteracy, and levels of education, and your socioeconomic conditions largely dictate your religion.

The pushback is that the work the program does in a way does change someone's religious beliefs and their beliefs about science, which can be pretty fundamental to a person's own identity, their own conception of their self. How does that come in? Do you see that as dangerous at all? What's your goal?

It is very dangerous, that's why I agree with you. And I must say, I was very aware of what you told me earlier and was very worried and concerned because I think the biggest mistake you can make is trying to undermine someone's religious belief, trying to lessen it. Why would you want to do that? The idea is not to do that. The idea is to strengthen your faith but allow for an awakening of the awe and beauty around you by incorporating the theory. And that's why it rests so strongly on your presenter. When I come in, my job is to make evolutionary theory sound easy because it is easy. There's nothing diabolical about it: it's a simple law of nature. But the pivotal role is the second talk because the priest's role is not to undermine, not to lessen, but to show how that whatever faith you have, it can grow and remain steady. And they come away a more enriched person. That's the idea. It is very dangerous ground. Your objective is not to walk away with those kids feeling less faithful, but enriched. That's the objective, and if you lose sight of that objective, you must stop the program.
Do you think the Jesuit identity has any effect on people’s reception of the message or any influence on the program itself?

I don’t think that they’d be aware of it. I think the fact that the audience knows it’s a Roman Catholic priest is what’s important. But for myself, knowing the Jesuit Institute and Jesuits, they are very liberal, and they do think very differently than parish priests, which may have shocked and surprised people in the audience who were expecting a parish priest with the collar on. Maybe it does need to be toned down a bit with its liberalism; maybe it needs to be more in line with generally accepted dogma. But no, I don’t think people are aware of it. I think they know him to be a priest, and they are waiting to hear him speak as they would expect priests to speak. I think it’s a very good thing. I mean, saying that a priest is coming along is what makes the program important—that’s the key thing about the whole program. That’s why they welcome me into the school because if I just came on my own, I wouldn’t get the audience.

List of Interviews

Tracey Adams  
Science Teacher, St. Teresa’s School

Father Anthony  
Jesuit Priest, Jesuit Institute of South Africa  
Lecturer, the “Believing in Creation and Evolution” Project

Ann Cameron  
Academic Advisor, Science Teaching and Learning Centre  
University of the Witwatersrand, Faculty of science

Rosa Calaca  
Director, Catholic Schools Office

Natalie de Abreu, Harry Houseman, Harry Moyo, and Samantha Sadie  
High School Students, De La Salle Holy Cross College

Leanne Te Brake  
Religious Education Teacher, De La Salle Holy Cross College

Paul Faller  
National Coordinator of Religious Education in Catholic Schools  
Catholic Institute of Education

Rene Ferguson  
Professor, Life Orientation and Religious Studies  
University of the Witwatersrand, School of Education

Peter Knox  
Jesuit Priest, Jesuit Institute of South Africa  
Lecturer, the “Believing in Creation and Evolution” Project

Alex Parkinson  
Masters Candidate, Berhard Price Institute for Paleontological Research, University of the Witwatersrand  
Lecturer, the “Believing in Creation and Evolution” Project

Raymond Perrier  
Director, Jesuit Institute of South Africa

Soweto Teacher  
Science Teacher, St. Matthew’s Secondary School

Pamela King, Kamillah de Nobrega, Emma Sham, Briley Carter, Brittany Edwards, Bronwyn Robertson, Claire Viljoen  
High School Students, St. Teresa’s School

Melusa Mayuso, Lerato Tsotetsi, Nathi Gamede, Lungile Skhosana, Mapaseka Msibi  
High School Students, St. Matthew’s Secondary School

Merrill van der Walt  
Paleontologist, Education Specialist & Manager of New Business and Strategic Partnerships  
The Origins Centre, University of the Witwatersrand

Adam Yates  
Paleontologist, Berhard Berhard Price Institute for Paleontological Research, University of the Witwatersrand
Overview
Codie Kane, a senior Psychology major and Spanish minor in Georgetown College, is originally from Connecticut. In June 2011, Codie partnered with the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) in El Salvador, where she conducted interviews with teachers, students, administrators, and community members. Her research explored the relationship between social and economic inequity and differential access to education in the San Salvador region. She focused specifically on UCA's understanding and treatment of this issue in the context of their Jesuit tradition, with a particular emphasis on how their work has been influenced by the role of the Jesuit order in the 1980-1992 El Salvador Civil War.

Partner Institution: Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas,” San Salvador, El Salvador
In 1965, the Society of Jesus proposed the creation of an alternative university that would be oriented towards the socio-economic development of El Salvador. The Jesuits’ plan received government approval, and in September of 1965, the university began to teach its first group of 357 students. The university firmly believes that social injustice can be eliminated through the process of liberation, and UCA finds inspiration in the Catholic religious tradition that promotes the construction of a new reality based on Christian ideals. These values include viewing the poor and marginalized as the privileged within the kingdom of God, denying the importance of earthly riches and honors, living as men and women for others, acknowledging the dignity of all human beings, actively affirming the principle of the preferential option for the poor, and working to create a just society. These beliefs, inspired by Catholic social teaching, form the base of UCA’s work and commitment to social justice.
THE CASE OF EL SALVADOR: BRIDGING THE URBAN-RURAL EDUCATION DIVIDE

“Higher education [in El Salvador] is still for the privileged. It’s expensive and concentrated in the capital. In the rural areas where it is difficult to access, people simply don’t consider going.” - Ada Zarceno

“Educational conditions in rural El Salvador are hard to imagine.”- Maria del Carmen Cruz Senovilla

As the statements above suggest, the country of El Salvador consists of two distinct, yet interdependent realms—the rural and the urban. Though both face significant issues, the rural zone is characterized by isolation and neglect. While urban areas have modernized over the past twenty years, rural communities remain underdeveloped. Their citizens are largely excluded from the formal economy, restricted from work outside of the informal sector, and dependent on subsistence agriculture. They suffer from an appreciably lower standard of living and limited opportunities. Many do not have access to clean water, sanitation, or health services. Fifty percent live in poverty.

The rural-urban divide in El Salvador consists of, and is maintained by, various structural factors. Of these, education is arguably the most important, as it is inferior in quality and more difficult to access in the rural zone. This disparity effectively limits the growth potential of the rural region and deepens the social divisions from which it arose.

Improving rural education and, thus, closing this gap is key to ending regional inequality and reducing poverty in the country as a whole. This report identifies initiatives led by the Universidad Centroamericana and a local Jesuit parish that are working to improve rural education, focusing on efforts that value community-driven change. It examines, in particular, the UCA’s Distance Learning for Education Students Program and the Desarrollo Hermano Popular scholarship program as projects that propose to expand higher learning opportunities in Chalatenango, a rural department north of San Salvador. The programs share a common, Jesuit-based mission, envisioning citizen empowerment through education as an impetus for local development. This research highlights the best practices of programs working to support education in isolated areas and promote the idea of community empowerment as a mechanism for change.
Education in rural El Salvador

The rural education system is divided into three cycles. It consists of nine years of basic education, three years of high school, and three or more years of higher education. It is composed primarily of public schools that receive state funding and follow a curriculum standardized by the Ministry of Education.

As a result of its context and history, rural education remains of a strikingly low quality. Facing regional poverty, underdevelopment, and lack of government support, rural schools do not have the staff, funds, or supplies necessary to provide students with a comprehensive academic experience. They have inadequate access to technology and materials, including computers, televisions, and laboratory equipment. Most must use an integrated classroom system, in which two or more grades are taught simultaneously in a single room. Though teachers are incredibly devoted, they are unable to compensate for such a shortage of resources. Students’ learning suffers because, as Elmer Eriberto Castro Rodriguez, a public school teacher in the village of Los Pozos states, “we are able to teach the students theory, but we are unable to provide them with the opportunity to put that theory in practice.”

Moreover, rural areas have limited access to education. Though most children attend primary school, many do not go to high school or college. 20% fewer students, in fact, attend high school than in urban zones. Economic factors primarily account for this discrepancy. School is prohibitively expensive for most rural citizens. Without a fixed income or savings, they are unable to compensate for such a shortage of resources. Students’ learning suffers because, as Elmer Eriberto Castro Rodriguez, a public school teacher in the village of Los Pozos states, “we are able to teach the students theory, but we are unable to provide them with the opportunity to put that theory in practice.”

The unique history of rural education in El Salvador complicates these issues. The present system results from local teaching efforts that developed out of necessity during the civil war. When the Salvadorian Ministry of Education abandoned rural areas in response to escalating violence in the early 1980s, citizens organized their own “popular schools.” These schools were supported primarily by the Catholic Church, which provided materials, training for teachers, and administrative guidance through the work of local Jesuit priests. They were eventually converted into the state-sponsored public schools that exist today. The legacy of popular schools has been crucial in the effort to use education as an impetus for community development.

Local education initiatives

Distance Learning for Education Students
Fortunately, the zone is now home to various projects that build on the Church’s wartime efforts to improve local education and, in the Jesuit tradition, advance social justice. The Distance Learning for Education Students program serves as an initiative designed to expand access to higher education through bringing university classes to rural areas. Part of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), it enables participants to obtain teaching degrees from the UCA’s Department of Education from within the Morazan or Chalatenango region.

The program was introduced in 2005 as an experimental effort to increase educational coverage throughout El Salvador. It is based on the Formation of Popular Educators program, a project that brought University of San Salvador professors to a Chalatenan-
go village to help formally train the staff of popular schools immediately after the civil war. It took as a model the program’s commitment to bringing university to students, rather than requiring students to go to university, in order to truly achieve equal opportunity in higher learning. In 2009, the Ministry of Education accepted it as a permanent project at the UCA. Since its launch, three graduations of approximately one hundred people have occurred.

In essence, Distance Learning for Education Students is a normal teaching degree program. Its class content, tests, and graduation requirements are equivalent to those of the teaching program located on the UCA’s campus. Its “blended distance” modality serves as the distinguishing factor of the program. Students take classes independently on a specialized Internet platform. UCA professors, who hold discussions, answer questions, and introduce new material via discussion boards, email, and online chats, support the students. Live classroom sessions supplement students’ virtual work. Once a week, professors conduct day-long classes in each of the designated program centers in Morazan and Chalatenango.

The initiative represents a response to the financial and structural obstacles that residents of rural, disadvantaged areas face in pursuing higher education. Maribel Serrano de Mejia, a program professor, explains, “Costs are too high and travel is too hard for [students] to attend a normal university. With distance learning, however, they only have to travel to Las Flores once a week. Their travel, food, and housing expenses are low. The program cost itself is cheaper than the UCA’s regular price.”

Such accessibility provides an important psychological boost to the region. Through demonstrating the feasibility of obtaining a teaching degree, the program engenders hope among younger students and prompts them to consider a future in their studies. In an area in which the vast majority of people do not yet see opportunities in education, this program provides a great service. It counters the beliefs that cause many youth to lose interest in their studies at an early age. Miguel Angel Ayala de Orellana, director of the Carasque public school recounts, “[The students] seem to feel that education is irrelevant to their lives. ‘Why study if I’m just going to work in the fields?’ they say.”

Perhaps more importantly, the program represents a concrete means of spurring community development through the establishment of a self-perpetuating cycle of educational and economic growth. According to Maria del Carmen Cruz, a professor at the UCA, “the program is […] intended to have a trickle-down effect.” It produces highly qualified teachers in areas in which illiteracy remains widespread and education quality poor. Assuming that graduates will remain in their communities of origin, the Distance Education program prepares them to act as catalysts to promote the transformation of local schools. It explicitly readies them to do so, in fact, by focusing on pedagogical techniques that take into account the particular disadvantaged environments in which they will work. According to the program model, as schooling improves over time, more youth will have the skills and the desire to pursue higher learning. The students will obtain professional degrees and, eventually, provide services and cash flow to local communities, stimulating rural development. Teachers thus act as local leaders, directing their communities towards a more progressive future.

According to Ada Zarceno, one of the project’s architects, the Distance Education program is a product of the UCA’s Jesuit tradition, a manifestation of the institution’s Jesuit-based commitment to work for positive social change. Zarceno comments, “It is designed to change the structure of our society through forming good students and teachers. It demonstrates a commitment to social justice, because it targets one of the most vulnerable populations in the country. It empowers them to help their own communities and makes them conscious of the injustices around them.”

Unfortunately, the program faces multiple obstacles. Working in a context of poverty and isolation, the same factors that warrant its existence hinder the program’s progress. The very nature of Morazan and Chalatenango, in fact, makes its operation difficult. These
two departments lack the infrastructure necessary to permit the basic communication and local travel that the program requires. For example, the communities lack a navigable highway system. Many professors speak of cancelling class sessions when their vehicles cannot pass through muddy, water-filled roads during the rainy season. The area also has few computers and inadequate Internet coverage. Students must travel significant distances when they wish to access the online course platform, relying on public libraries and cyber cafes.

In addition, by virtue of where they live, the participants themselves represent challenges to program functioning. Without economic or material resources, they find school attendance difficult. Despite the minimal cost of the program, few are able to afford it. They must work at the same time as they take classes or apply for scholarship money in order to enroll. Many cannot pay for transportation to the weekly class session. Serrano de Mejia describes, “They walk for hours rather than taking the bus in order to save money. Some have to wake up at three or four in the morning to arrive on time.” These factors prevent students from devoting the same degree of time and energy to their studies as their urban counterparts. Life stressors thus negatively affect their potential for educational success.

Perhaps the most serious issue that the program faces, however, is the lack of teacher positions in the area. Achieving its ultimate goal, regional development, depends on whether participants find employment in their communities after graduation. Unfortunately, most rural teaching jobs have been occupied for many years, with few new openings. Graduates often wait an extended period before receiving a job offer or take a position in a different field out of necessity.

Desarrollo Hermano Popular Scholarship program
The Desarollo Hermano Popular Scholarship program is an initiative with a similar model located in the Nueva Trinidad municipality of Chalatenango. Like the Distance Learning for Education Students program, it envisions improved access to higher education as the key to citizen-driven development. It was created in 2002 from a disparate group of small scholarship funds by the local parish. With money donated by sister parishes in the United States and Canada, it assists students from the municipality who wish to pursue higher education. It uses funds to maintain several dormitories in San Salvador and subsidize transportation to and from universities.

The program is designed to function not only as a source of financial aid, but also as a mechanism for regional advancement. It targets only those students who demonstrate a commitment to their local communities and requires that they apply the skills they gain through attending college to benefit their village of origin. In essence, the Desarollo Hermano Popular Scholarship functions as an investment program, providing local youth with the means to gain knowledge that they can later use for the common good.

A committee of parish and community members, including teachers, parents of recipients, and students,
manages the scholarships. The committee determines which applicants will receive financial assistance, monitors current recipients, and follows up with alumni. In order to partake in the program, students must complete an extensive application for committee review. They must demonstrate good grades, leadership, financial need, and, most importantly, an unselfish desire to help their communities. If accepted, they are required to attend various program meetings, regularly report their university grades, and complete chores in the scholarship-funded houses. In order to further foment their commitment to Nueva Trinidad, recipients must also complete one hundred and twenty service hours in their village of origin per academic year.

The initiative recognizes the hidden financial barriers that prevent rural students from going to university and works to correct them. It does not offer tuition assistance, acknowledging that students generally receive ample financial aid from their college of choice, and, instead, provides transportation and housing support, ameliorating expenses that are often overlooked. Though its scholarships are small, they frequently determine whether a student can or cannot afford to continue academic study.

At the same time, the program initiates a cycle of generational educational improvements by demonstrating the viability of obtaining a university degree. It shows current elementary, middle, and high school students that they can afford to attend college and should consider doing so. It directly targets youth, taking steps to make them aware of the scholarships and encouraging them to apply. Ultimately, the hope that this engenders becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, motivating students to work hard until they reach their education goals.

Like the Distance Education program, the Desarrollo Hermano Popular project uses a community empowerment model in its effort to advance local development. It enables citizens to pursue higher education and, thus, begin professional careers. The program effectively provides individuals with the knowledge, skills, social connections, and economic resources necessary to drive regional growth. It ensures that this occurs through specifically selecting recipients who are interested in helping their region. It also cultivates their commitment by requiring that they do local service work and promoting the expectation that recipients will return to live in their community after graduation. More than just program participants, however, it also empowers scholarship committee members, providing the opportunity to indirectly affect community affairs through their role in selecting scholarship recipients. Though many lack the expertise or resources to spearhead future development themselves, their role on the committee enables them to handpick those who will.

As a parish program, the initiative is highly influenced by the Jesuit tradition. It takes as a mandate the Jesuit commitment to advancing social justice, explicitly working to correct social inequalities through ending the rural-urban disparity in higher education. The importance of “cura personalis”, or education for the whole person, also plays a large role. The program asks its participants to envision how they can use their classwork to benefit society. It thus endeavors to promote academic, spiritual, and moral growth by requiring students to apply what they learn to improve the lives of those around them.
Unfortunately, the scholarship program's effectiveness remains limited by a variety of factors. Most importantly, it lacks the funds necessary to help many students in a significant way. Vicenta, a committee member and Carasque public school teacher, explains: “We have many applicants, almost all of whom have minimal financial resources, and low funds. We sometimes end up giving students amounts as low as $25.” This funding issue is due, in part, to the informal manner in which the program operates. It does not keep records of recipients or track participants’ progress after graduation. It also lacks an official mission statement and explanatory literature. As a result, the program often goes unnoticed by potential donors.

Like the Distance Learning program, the Desarollo Hermano Popular program’s effectiveness is limited by the nature of the population with which it works. Participants tend to find it difficult to live up to program goals after they enroll. Though they are given the financial assistance required for a college education, they lack the academic and emotional support needed to live and study in San Salvador. Most feel overwhelmed by their courses, stating that their previous schools in Chalatenango did not adequately prepare them for university-level work. They struggle to catch up to students from urban areas, the majority of whom began using computers, doing science experiments, and conducting research at much younger ages. According to Carlos Orellano, a scholarship recipient from Arcatao, the social adjustment to urban life is also challenging. He recounts, “It was a transition to come to the city from Arcatao. When I first got here, I almost never went out into the street. I didn’t know anyone or anything. I was afraid.” Finally, students are faced with an uncertain future after graduation. The poor economy and lack of employment, particularly in their region of origin, makes finding a job a daunting task. Some are forced to work in sectors outside of their area of interest or expertise; others settle for salaries lower than they deserve.

**Conclusions**

Despite their limitations, both the Distance Learning for Education Students Program and the Desarollo Hermano Popular scholarship program offer hope for rural El Salvador. Imbued with a sense of moral duty derived from their relationship with the Catholic faith, these programs represent the first steps in closing the urban-rural educational divide. Through the empowerment of community members to direct local development, they constitute sustainable efforts to affect social change. The sense of possibility they engender is embodied in citizens’ optimistic statements about the future of their region. As Castro Rodriguez summarizes:

“People are finally beginning to leave this area to pursue higher education. They’re becoming professionals and, at the same time, carry in their heart love for where they came from. With their jobs, they can help their family, their community, and their country. I think and hope that this phenomenon, education for the purpose of improving one’s place of origin, is the future.”

**Notes**

INTERVIEW EXCERPTS

A discussion with Eduardo Antonio Ayala Cruz, President of the Community Directive

July 7, 2011

Eduardo Antonio Ayala Cruz is president of the community directive in Carasque, Nueva Trinidad, Chalatenango. Committed to working for his fellow citizens, he decided to refrain from attending college in order to help lead his village. He is currently involved in community life at all levels, ensuring that local water standards are met along with organizing holiday celebrations. He supplements these responsibilities with work as a youth facilitator at the public school in the nearby town of Nueva Trinidad. As a recent high school graduate, he exemplifies the energy and commitment of young people in the region.

Describe to me the state of education in your community, Carasque, from your point of view. What are the positive aspects? What are the challenges?

The school in Carasque is good almost entirely because of its teachers. They were all originally popular educators. This means that, as a result of some noticeable talent or trait, they were selected by the community to begin teaching during the civil war. Today, their ability and commitment remains apparent. They see the school as a place to shape our youth. They teach them values and prevent them from going down the wrong path. This is particularly exemplified by the school’s sports program. The students used to have a soccer team that competed against other schools’ teams. Last year, the teachers decided to require the teams to consist of children of multiple schools, rather than be school-specific. In this way, the students have learned to stop thinking in terms of rivalries and start thinking about cooperation. There are fewer interschool problems.

The challenge here lies in pursuing education after ninth grade. When students graduate, they must go to another village for high school. Until recently, this involved leaving the municipality all together. Many families can’t afford to pay for such extensive transportation. It’s possible, however, that this will change soon as a result of the newly constructed high school in Nueva Trinidad. Though most people don’t yet think of it as a viable option, its close location may enable more students to pursue a high school diploma.

It’s even more difficult for students to go from high school to college. As agricultural laborers, the majority of El Salvador’s rural population doesn’t have enough money
to pay the cost of a university education. If they want to continue their studies, they have to look for a scholarship from the parish, an NGO, or another outside institution. If they can’t get a scholarship, they must have a family member or friend who has immigrated to the United States who can send them money to sponsor their studies.

How does education here affect the community as a whole?

I think education is the root of community organization in Carasque. It teaches people how to lead, organize, and be good administrators. This, in turn, has meant that we can have community projects. People know how to work in teams and critically evaluate project results. In a similar manner, the school has encouraged the development of a healthy community here. Students learn values and morals in the classroom. In consequence, there are few people involved in illegal or dangerous activities.

In general, education has had an impact on our community because people have truly put what they have learned into practice. A great example of this is the youth theater group. Students were given a single theater workshop in school. They then went on to develop and produce their own plays about local issues. These plays are now serving to transmit important messages and encourage young people to participate in community life. They’re making a name for Carasque.

What has been the role of the Church in education here?

For a time, the school here was in the church. I think this says a lot about the role of the Church in education—it teaches faith, as well as concrete material.

There’s a lot of faith here. It helps people persist in pursuing their dreams. It teaches them that they can’t give up, that they must work hard. This is particularly true for educational and professional goals, because they are so difficult to achieve. Faith gives them strength to overcome adversity and become lawyers, doctors, etc.

The local parish also offers tangible support to the school and students in the community. Though they don’t generally buy us materials directly, they work to maintain relationships with parishes and church groups in other countries who, in turn, send us resources and funds. When foreign religious delegations come, additionally, they ask participants to get involved in the school, teaching English or supervising students.

---

A discussion with Maria del Carmen Cruz Senovilla, Professor and Researcher at UCA

July 10, 2011

Maria del Carmen Cruz Senovilla is a professor and researcher in the Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (UCA) Education Department. She began training rural citizens as teachers during the Salvadorian civil war. She ultimately created the first popular education system in the country, founding sixteen popular schools. She remains committed to the communities in which these schools were located and to the tenants of popular education.

She has a doctorate in education from the National University of Distance Education and a degree in special education from the Universidad Complutense in Madrid. She is trained in various education-related fields, including the improvement of education systems and the improvement of teacher development systems.

Describe to me the state of education in rural areas of El Salvador. What are the positive aspects? What are the challenges?

Educational conditions in rural El Salvador are hard to imagine, particularly in smaller communities. Since the initiation of popular education during the civil war, there has been significant progress. Schools are now legally recognized by the Ministry of Education and teachers are licensed. The school network is expanding and improving. In general, however, rural education faces serious issues. It has been more or less abandoned by the government. It is not monitored and its needs go unaddressed. As a result, schools receive inadequate funding and support. They suffer from inferior material conditions, including poorly constructed classrooms and a lack of books and resources. Students, already vulnerable because of regional poverty,
are left unassisted. They must walk long distances to reach school, often after having woken up early to help their parents in the fields. Such conditions are not conducive to learning. They lead to poor academic outcomes for students and stagnation in the educational system as a whole. Some rural areas are better off than others. The communities that were most affected by the civil war, for example, have strong education systems. They are highly organized because they were forced to meet their own needs during the conflict. They created their own institutions and support networks, including schools. Their “popular schools” provided education to a generation of youth who would otherwise have grown up illiterate. They caused citizens to consider and value education. Today, their legacy motivates communities to work to maintain high-quality schools. Citizens remember their success and remain committed to supporting students. Ex-popular teachers know how to make do with minimal resources and use their experience to benefit current classrooms.

Tell me about other rural education projects you’re working on, particularly the distance learning program for education students.

The distance learning program for education students is an online teaching degree program that operates through the UCA. It is designed to expand access to higher education in Morazan and Chalatenango, rural departments characterized by their poverty and isolation. Its participants lack the financial and social resources necessary to travel to San Salvador, the location of the majority of colleges in the country. In the program, however, they do not have to go to the university; the university comes to them. They take virtual courses from UCA professors that are supplemented by weekly live classroom sessions. They experience the same degree of academic rigor and quality of instruction as students at the UCA campus, but do not have to leave their region.

The program is also intended to have a trickle-down effect, creating new teachers who can use what they have learned to boost local academics and improve regional school systems. It prepares them to get jobs in their communities and equips them with the methodological techniques that are effective in such environments. Ultimately, it will ensure that students are provided with a high quality education and college preparation. It will enable them to go on to pursue professional degrees or become teachers themselves.

In a similar manner, the program is designed to encourage community organization. It fosters leadership skills and commitment to community issues among participants. It prepares them to engage in local affairs, making them instruments of regional development. Many graduates, in fact, find employment at NGOs involved in community projects rather than at schools.

A discussion with Carlos Orellano, Student at UCA

June 23, 2011

Carlos Orellano is a twenty-two-year-old student from Arcatao, Chalatenango, El Salvador. He is currently in his fifth year at the Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (UCA) studying information technology. As a recipient of a Desarrollo Hermano Popular scholarship, he hopes one day to return to his community to participate in local development projects.

It sounds like you’ve overcome a lot to be able to con-
Continue studying. What motivates you to keep pushing forward?

I work hard for my family. I want to be able to help them. I want my parents to be able to say that their son is a professional. I'm not really working for myself. I know the importance of solidarity and sharing. My education will help not just me, but my community as a whole. It will be part of how we move forward together.

I'm also committed to education, because I understand the power of knowledge. I've seen a lot of struggles in life and I know how much people can lose—their car, their house, even their family. One thing they can't be robbed of, though, is what's in their head. No matter what happens to me, I'll always have what I learn.

Tell me about education in your community.

As I said before, I arrived at college unprepared for the work that was asked of me. I think this is because of the lack of resources to which my school has access. It doesn't have enough teachers and it certainly doesn't have enough specialists. Its library is small and has very few books with relevant, academic information. In general, students learn a lot of theory, but are given little practice. Without the appropriate tools, they don't have the opportunity to apply what they learn to real life. In my case, for instance, I arrived at college without ever having done a science or math experiment. It was a shock to have to learn how to do them when everyone else had done so years ago.

What has been the role of the church in your community and in education there in particular?

Since I can remember, the church in Arcatao has been made up of Jesuits. They've had an incredible impact. They've all had such energy to help the community. They don't just preach; they really work to make our lives better. Father Miguel, in particular, has had a strong presence since I was growing up. He joined the parish during the war and has been accompanying the community in its struggles ever since. He was an activist throughout the conflict. He didn't use arms, but, instead, stood up for the people. He denounced what he thought was wrong and, for this, made a lot of enemies. He lived through the same suffering as we did. He is the type of person that gives hope. It was Father Miguel that started the scholarship initiative, Desarrollo Hermano Popular, which allowed me to come to college. The idea of the program is to enable young people to continue studying so that they can become professionals. They can then return to their hometowns and act as the motors of development. In this way, change and progress is organic; it comes from the community members themselves.

To get the scholarship, candidates have to demonstrate not only good grades and participation, but also a desire to return to their community. They have to show that they don't just want to work for themselves, but for those around them. They need to understand what it means to move forward together. They submit an application that consists of a questionnaire, letters of recommendation from a member of the church and of the community, and a statement describing their financial situation. The application is reviewed by a committee made up of parents, teachers, and other community members. They usually all know the applicant and are able to say based on firsthand knowledge whether he or she is a good person who meets the scholarship criteria. The money I received allowed me to go the UCA. The education I’m getting is exactly what the committee is looking for. It’s more than academic—it’s about values, morals, and justice.

A discussion with Maribel Serrano de Mejia, School Teacher and Principal

June 25, 2011

Maribel Serrano de Mejia is a teacher and principal at the public school in San José Las Flores, Chalatenango. She began her teaching career during the El Salvador civil war. Though she was a witness to some of the conflict’s most devastating events, she became one of the first popular teachers in the Chalatenango region. After working without state recognition for more than a decade, she was offered an official teaching position in 1999. She currently supports the Universidad Centroamericana’s distance learning program for education students, whose Chalatenango branch operates out of her school.
Tell me about your experience as a teacher. How did you arrive at your present career?

My story is a little strange, because it takes place during an armed conflict. It begins in 1980, when the war started. In that year, my family had to leave where we had been living to escape the escalating violence. We moved around for two years, until we finally decided to go into the forest and hide. We couldn't return to our original home because it was surrounded by soldiers. They didn't permit anyone to enter or exit. It wasn't until the guerillas arrived that the area was liberated.

When we finally returned, our house was burned to the ground. We had to live in the open, using pieces of plastic strung between trees as shelter. The rest of the community eventually joined as well. We began organizing. We knew we had to work together to survive. We formed a women’s committee, a health committee, a food cooperative, and a school.

That was how I became a teacher. I had only gotten up to sixth grade, but I decided to try to help teach the children how to read and write. I decided to start work as a popular educator. I had no material, but I made do with what was around me. I gave the kids sticks, stones, and patches of earth instead of paper, pencils, and books. They always got so excited when they learned something new. It was beautiful. The whole time, we had to be very careful. We couldn’t let the army know what we were doing, because teaching was considered subversive. We had to stop if any soldiers arrived. “Let’s go! Soldiers are coming!” I would say, and the children would run home to their parents. If they had known what was going on, they would have killed us.

As people from other communities began doing the same and the number of popular teachers increased, our educational efforts progressed. We helped each other and got assistance from outside organizations and individuals. A woman from Spain, for example, arrived to teach us methodology and help us catch up on our own studies. At night, we learned math or language arts under her guidance and during the day we used her same lessons with our kids. I’ll never forget that she brought us a book that contained words related to war so we could learn to read and write about the things we had suffered.

When the war began to die down, all of the popular teachers entered into a formal training process. We had to catch up on our own education. I started with my sixth grade level and got up to ninth grade. I then went through high school in an accelerated, distance learning program. Ultimately, I got my teaching degree from the University of El Salvador’s distance learning program.

Throughout the process, all of the popular teachers and I continued to teach, but we did so without pay. We lived on food and the occasional stimulus donated by the parish. Eventually, we couldn’t do it anymore. We couldn’t keep giving classes with nothing to live on. We had children we had to support. We demanded that the state recognize us and give us salaries. With the help of the government of Denmark and various other institutions, we got them to. I was the first teacher to be granted an official teaching position out of all my colleagues. When I found out, I was in Denmark. I had gone with a few other teachers to give them thanks for their support and solidarity. They told me, “You’re the first! You’re the first to get a spot!” Since I wasn’t in the country to sign my contract, the other teachers did it for me. When I got paid, we distributed the money, 300 colones, amongst everyone.

I’ve continued teaching because I want to ensure that new generations know what happened in the past. It’s only been twenty-five years since Las Flores was repopulated, since people who had to leave because of the war returned. Our children have to know this story so that nothing like it ever happens again.

How is the popular education model unique and how does it contribute to the creation of a more just society? How has your experience of popular education impacted you?

The original idea of popular education was education for all. All people, regardless of race, gender, religion, etc. deserve to learn. The Ministry of Education always talks about this now, but it originated with us.

In general, popular education is about reality. It attempts to help children analyze and understand what’s going on
around them. It looks for the truth when other, politically-driven education systems spout ideology. In my classroom, for example, we discuss the real history of El Salvador, of the war, and of other wars in other countries. We think about community issues—the fact that the highway that runs through this region is being constructed for the first time this year and that, before, it was a dirt path.

**Does the UCA’s Jesuit identity have an impact on the distance learning program?**

Having come out of a war, the community here supports a religion grounded in reality. We don’t want to hear about a far away, sleeping God. We don’t want priests to come here and pray all day. We want to hear that God is in every one of us. We want to talk about spirituality, but we also want to discuss our economic, political, and social situation.

These are ideas are based on the Jesuit tradition and they are also what the UCA teaches and practices. I think that they explain why the UCA implemented the distance learning program in San Jose Las Flores. The university recognized that the population here did not have the resources to get to San Salvador for a university education and that this was preventing them from moving forward. It acted to help remove the structural barriers that were oppressing a marginalized group.

**List of Interviews**

**Leonilo Aguirres**  
*Teacher and School Director*

**Maribel Aleman de Alas**  
*School Teacher*

**Josefina Aleman Menjivar**  
*School Teacher*

**Miguel Angel Ayala de Orellana**  
*School Teacher*

**Eduardo Antonio Ayala Cruz**  
*President of the Community Directive*

**Elmer Eriberto Castro Rodriguez**  
*School Teacher*

**Elvira Cordova de Cordova**  
*School Teacher*

**Maria del Carmen Cruz Senovilla**  
*Professor and Researcher, Universidad Centroamericana*

**Catalina Delgado Aleman**  
*School Teacher*

**Maria Emelina Orellana de Ayala**  
*Administrator for Potable Water Project*

**Rosa Letis Menjivar de Cordova**  
*School Teacher*

**Ada del Carmen Monje de Afaro**  
*School Teacher*

**Benigno Orellana**  
*Active Community Member, Nueva Trinidad, Chalatenango*

**Angela Orellana Franco**  
*School Teacher*

**Vicenta Orellana Franco**  
*School Teacher*

**Francisco Orellana Lopez**  
*Farmer and Store Owner*

**Carlos Orellano**  
*Student at Universidad Centroamericana*

**Maribel Serrano de Mejia**  
*School Teacher and Principal*

**Mauricio Trejo**  
*Head of Universidad Centroamericana*

**Ada Zarceno**  
*Specialist in Didactics and Curriculum Design, Universidad Centroamericana*