

Ignatian volunteers ‘find God in all things’

They mentor developmentally disabled adults, help poor people avoid foreclosure and teach homeless women how to reduce debt.

And the volunteers – all 50 or over – strive to see God in their work, through reflection based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits.

The Ignatian Volunteer Corps, founded in Baltimore in 1995, pairs mature, experienced volunteers with a wide variety of social service agencies and offers spiritual guidance to the volunteers.

“St. Ignatius’ philosophy is that we find God in all things, in the ordinary experience of everyday life,” said Jane Vichi, regional director of IVC Baltimore.

“Our focus is to really look at the volunteer experience in light of how we see God in that experience with clients and in the work the volunteers are doing,” Ms. Vichi said. “This process helps the volunteers discover the deeper meaning of the work they do and see Christ more clearly as they labor among their brothers and sisters who are poor.”

To that end, the volunteers meet monthly with a “spiritual reflector” – a religious or layperson familiar with Ignatian spirituality – and gather with other volunteers to talk about their experience. Volunteers, each of whom agrees to work two days a week for 10 months, also go on two overnight spiritual retreats in that span.

James Cooke, a retired sales executive who had worked at a glass company, began volunteering at St. Peter’s Adult Learning Center in West Baltimore in 2004.

Mr. Cooke taught the developmentally disabled adults there. He lent a sympathetic ear, comforted them and took them to play bocce ball, baseball and basketball.

“I get more out of this than the people there, and that to me was a pleasant surprise,” said Mr. Cooke, an 81-year-old parishioner of St. Joseph, Cockeysville. “I developed an affection for them. I became more attached to them and asked, ‘What can I do to make them happy?’”

He said the work made him more thankful for God’s gifts to him and, in turn, prompted him to ask what he should do to help others.

Last year, 16 IVC volunteers worked at 14 partner agencies serving poor people.

While the volunteers typically sign on for a 10-month commitment, most return to continue working with IVC.

Their service has proved invaluable, said Chip Woods, executive director of St. Peter’s Adult Learning Center.

“They embody the Jesuit spirit of compassion, of social justice, of humility,” Mr. Woods said. “And they’re empowering the folks they serve.”