LEARNING AGREEMENT

FC 6399 Service Learning and Leadership Practicum
MA in Faith and Culture – University of St Thomas, Houston

Spring 2015

I. Personal Contact Information
   A. Student Name: Monica Hatcher
   B. Phone Number(s); Email: 281-460-7975; monicahatcher@aol.com
   C. Address: 1404 Zora Street, Houston, TX 77055

II. Organization/Partnership Information
   A. Name: Northwest Assistance Ministry – Interfaith Hospitality Network/ St. Ignatius Loyola.
   B. Field Supervisor’s Name (If known): Fr. Joseph Dang – at NAM (currently unknown)
   C. Contact Information, including phone number and email: Fr. Joseph Dang.
      JDang@silcc.org; 291-370-3401
   D. Mission of the Organization:

Northwest Assistance Ministries is a non-sectarian, non-governmental organization that works to help individuals, regardless of race, cultural and religious background, achieve independence while respecting every difference. A collaborative effort of faith groups, including churches and synagogues, community partners, donors and volunteers, NAM pools and leverages collective community resources to meet basic human needs and to help individuals regain and find their financial self-sufficiency, creating a better Northwest Houston. I am interested in working in NAM’s Interfaith Hospitality Network department, which collaborates with 20 local churches to provide shelter and meals for temporarily homeless families. Individuals enrolled in IHN spend their days at NAM where they receive help and instruction in finding and applying for jobs as well as addressing the issues that lead to homelessness. At night, they stay at participating churches where congregations offer dinner and fellowship and a safe place to sleep. I work at NAM on Fridays in their Emergency Basic Needs Department, but I am paid by St. Ignatius.

St. Ignatius Loyola is a rapidly growing Catholic Parish of 4,600 families in Spring, TX. I work here.

Note: I have not yet gotten approval from my supervisor at St. Ignatius nor have I touched base with the appropriate contact at NAM’s IHN department. I would possibly need approval from a panel of people at Church (if part of my project is considered a ministry) and the supervisors of NAM. I have talked it over with my direct supervisor, Fr Joseph Dang, but we didn’t firm anything up. The pastor would have to OK it all, well, mainly regarding the small group I would like to start. Maybe they would allow me to do a “pilot” group for the duration of the practicum.
E. Description – Discuss why you have chosen this organization; provide a description of this organization’s “fit” with your overall academic/career objectives:

My plan involves education and action. I want to learn about the problem of poverty in America and the causes of financial instability and homelessness among families, particularly single women with children. I am also interested in helping overcome these problems by taking, in the spirit of the Catholic Worker Movement, personal responsibility for the poverty I encounter and also empowering and organizing others, particularly women in the low-wage, service economy to become agents for social change. So, my proposal has three components.

1. By working in NAM’s IHN department, I will learn about the causes and the institutional response to poverty and homelessness. NAM contracts with government agencies to administer housing grants and subsidies through a number of programs for low-income people.

2. I would like to start an empowerment or support circle for women in Northwest Houston who exist on the razor edge of destitution. Ideally, I would like to host this group at St. Ignatius, but if that is not possible, I could find another venue. This group would affirm the dignity and courage of women whose suffering and struggle often occur in debilitating isolation. I want this to be a solidarity and faith group, but ideally it would create a forum for learning about and discussing from a Christian social justice perspective the economic and social problems that perpetuate poverty for one in five Americans.

3. Thirdly, I have a very strong desire to respond in a personal way, at a personal sacrifice, to help the many people I meet who need immediate help when it is so frequently unavailable. So, I plan on converting my small garage into a micro-shelter, more properly a Christ Room, another concept from Peter Maurin, where I can receive the stranger into my home. He said that every Christian home should have a Christ Room to welcome Jesus in the guise of the poor.

This project fits in with my overall academic, career and spiritual objectives very well. It folds in with my current work in social ministry in that it will help me find new ways to engage our parish community in service and social justice work. Academically it allows me to explore the root causes and institutional responses to poverty. And, again, it allows me to personally respond in a meaningful way to the poverty I meet regularly through my work, which is something I feel very obliged to do.

F. What do you, the MAFC student, see yourself bringing or contributing to the partnering organization (skills, convictions, etc)?

To NAM, I think I could bring my interpersonal care and special sensitivity to those facing crises as an assistant and a keen interest in exploring the issues they are dedicating themselves to addressing through the Interfaith Hospitality Network. I have learned quite a lot about community resources for those in need and would be a help in that respect. I think that I have
lot of patience to work with difficult people. In fact, in my work as a financial counselor at NAM one day a week in their Emergency Basic Needs department, the department head frequently brings special situations to me, recently a deaf couple and a mother who had just lost her son in a gruesome accident.

As far as what I can offer as a project of value to NAM’s IHN or the families served by NAM, I’ll have to think more about that. It could be some kind of a workshop for them or some kind of a lesson on some topic for the families such as the necessity of saving or budgeting. Since I hope to start the solidarity circle for low-wage women, I see this as more the service component of the plan, where my time at NAM would be more learning. But I should talk to you more about this.

To the solidarity circle for low-wage women, I think I could bring my personal commitment, my interest in exploring social issues, and my desire to help others recognize their worth and dignity and also to come to take pride in their own heroic strength and sacrifice to do their best against very difficult odds to provide for themselves and their children. Also, I can bring the things I have learned from the Faith and Culture program, particularly the lesson that it is necessary to examine and question the given-ness of the social order, which we don’t do. I have casually polled some of the women I have helped at my parish and many have said they would be interested. I have developed more lasting relationships with a few people who I believe would be able and interested in committing and helping facilitate the group. I’m excited about the idea of awakening within them a sense of their own power to do good, to overcome their challenges and make the world better for their neighbors. Of course, there’s no real telling whether I could make something like this happen. I don’t know if I have the ability or if anyone would really commit to making it a good, helpful group. I’ve never done anything like this. I see many similarities among the women I serve at the church, they may not be interested. But I would like to try. If I fail, well, there’s another valuable lesson!

To my Christ Room project, I will bring my growing familiarity with the Catholic Worker program that will help me explain more of the reasons for sharing my blessings with others at a personal sacrifice. Maybe it will inspire others who have extra space where they live.

I believe that through three components this service-learning project will help me advance my desire to open a House of Hospitality one day, or to help bring Peter Maurin’s vision of Houses of Hospitality into the Church. He believed that every parish should have a home to offer hospitality to the people who have nothing and nowhere to go, where it is easier for middle class people and the poor to encounter one another in mutually enriching relationships, and where social inequality is demystified. It is also a place where people with means can practice the works of mercy on a regular basis, sharing their wealth and their personal gifts with people without means. Where the old saying, “nobody is so rich they have nothing to receive; no one is so poor they have nothing to give,” can be lived.
If I open a Catholic Worker House one day, this project might possibly prepare me in many practical ways from understanding the challenges the working poor in our country face, as well as what can be done to help others build confidence in community to live as faithful citizens. Finally, I will have a chance to learn more about government homeless prevention programs and other resources for low-income people in Harris County that could be helpful in my work and in the House of Hospitality.

G. Learning Goals and Objectives

a. What do you seek to accomplish by working with this organization?

I would like to learn how families with children transition from homelessness as it is legally defined by the McKinney Vento Act, which is the eligibility criteria used by NAM, to permanent housing, and how at-risk families become aware of and access government housing programs. I’d also like to learn more about the various subsidized housing programs, including a new pilot program that provides housing for a couple of years with intensive case management. I’m also interested in learning how the agency works with Churches to temporarily house families until they can find a more permanent solution. And I’d like to learn how families cope and use the time they receive hospitality in the Interfaith Network to find work and save money to move on.

b. How will you accomplish this; what steps do you propose to take?

I think it would be a matter of spending time in the day center where the homeless families receive service and just follow their progress through homelessness in the Interfaith Program to various housing options or new work opportunities.

For the support group, I would need to develop a loose plan and perhaps a theme for each meeting and figure out how we would structure our time.

For the micro-shelter, two friends and my father said they would help me build out my garage. I may try crowd funding the project, since this in absolutely no way enhances the value of my house. My house is considered a “tear down” in a very desirable neighborhood. I will never sell the house, only the land it is on. I estimate I will need around $6,000 to build out the room, because I will need to make a restroom, which will be the biggest challenge and expense. Raising or earning money to build this will be something to do as I’m getting braces on my teeth and my student loans are coming out of forbearance. It’s not something I can pay out of pocket from the start. I’m ready to get started right away on this because my parents are moving abroad and my dad would really like to help me.
c. How will this experience embody what you, the student, have learned in the MAFC program?

I think I mentioned this above, but I really think that it will demonstrate my understanding from the Faith and Culture program of our need to commit to community involvement and live out our faith in service to the common good, to uphold human dignity and affirm the necessity of associational life to make our society better – that’s the idea behind the solidarity group, at least. It will also embody the lesson that the Church, the laity, particularly, has the duty to evangelize in word and deed by following Jesus and living the gospel together, so they will know we are Christians by our love... and to bring the Reign of God’s Love to our immediate communities by accompanying and serving people who are marginalized. Also, as I mentioned earlier, I’d like to help other people, the women that I hope the support circle will serve, see that it is ok to challenge the status quo, that the way things are, doesn’t mean they have to stay that way, and that we can all question the many distorted assumptions of our life and our American culture, to hopefully find a truer, more authentic and peaceful Christian path through life. And I think the Christ Room project is drawn from lessons about necessity to resist the gravitational pull of comfort and affluence that enfeebles the radical call of Jesus and dulls our spiritual senses to the needs of our brothers and sisters in Houston, much less across the world. I need to think more on this question. I’ve learned so much in the program, but I think chiefly it’s the call to action and engagement.

d. How will this experience advance or fit within your academic goals and career next steps? Please see letter E above.

H. Evaluation
This course is designed as a capstone practicum experience with the intention of fulfilling learning outcomes. As such, the student is evaluated (graded) based on the following components:
a. **Learning Agreement** - Student’s performance is evaluated by practicum director based on congruency between what the student said in the Learning Agreement that they wanted to accomplish and what was actually accomplished as demonstrated through all required activities and expectations of this practicum.

b. **Self-Evaluation** – Student’s self-evaluation at the end of the practicum is also weighed in assessing the final grade. In the Self-Evaluation students assess their experience and effectiveness in achieving the goals of the Learning Agreement and their Special Project.

c. **Supervisor’s Evaluation** - Field Supervisors also submit a final evaluation of the student’s performance.

d. **Practicum Director’s Evaluation** – Overall performance is assessed by the practicum director. Heavy emphasis is placed on the Learning Agreement, attendance at required events, completion and quality of Special Project (including planning, execution and delivery), as well as student’s and supervisor’s evaluations.

I. **Course Requirements**
   1. Volunteer 3-4 hours per week over 12-14 weeks at designated organization or agency
   2. Weekly journaling due at end of each week of the semester (normally due Sundays)
   3. Individual or group Special Project due at end of the semester **(no later than April 11, 2015)**. See **Special Project Information and Instructions**.
   4. Class will meet as a group at least three times a semester as scheduled; **attendance required**:
      a) **Monday, January 12, 2015**
      b) **Monday, March 2, 2015**
      c) **Monday, April 6, 2015**
   5. Other Requirements (to be completed by Field Supervisor and Program Director):
      ___________________________________________________________
      ___________________________________________________________
      ___________________________________________________________

J. **Acknowledgments and Approvals:**

I understand that the following document, upon final approval, is a learning contract between the student, the partnering organization and the MAFC degree program as it relates to the field experience component of the FC 6399 Service-Learning and Leadership Practicum. I understand that additional course requirements will be stipulated in the course syllabus to be distributed at the beginning of the course. This Learning Agreement is cancelled should I choose not to register for this course as scheduled.

a. Submitted:
b. Acknowledged:

__________________________  (Signed after Final approval.)
Student  Date


c. Approved:

__________________________  ____________________________
Field Supervisor  Date  Practicum Director  Date