During her time in Hebron, Palestine, Cory Lockhart carried alcohol pads in her pockets to counter the effects of tear gas and tried to make sure that Israeli soldiers saw that she, a Westerner, witnessed their actions. As a member of a Christian Peacemaker Team, Lockhart lived and witnessed in six-week stints with the Palestinian people, devoting herself to nonviolent peacemaking.

In unguarded moments, she says, those young soldiers reminded her of the faces of the Catholic students she taught for 14 years before getting her master’s degree in spirituality from a joint program between Bellarmine University and Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. When she managed to catch their eyes, she silently prayed: “I wish all of us love in our hearts, a love that is generous and vast.”

That sense of vast love, she says, is what drives her understanding of God and her mission in the world. “I want to operate from love and trust. That’s the central message of the gospels—to love your neighbor.”

Lockhart’s job at JustFaith Ministries (which asks on its home page, “Are you called to change the world?”) allows her to continue her volunteer commitment to Christian Peacemaker Teams. JustFaith runs programs that bring the church’s social justice teachings to parishes and satisfies her desire to live a life of mission in the world—albeit with less risk and heartache.

Kristen Hannum is a freelance journalist based in Denver.
“Work is a justice issue, and we were encouraged to be aware of possibilities. We also learned what questions we should ask going into a job. Will you be able to use your voice? Because it would be inauthentic to not use your voice, to not preach.”

“I use the word ‘calling,’” says Lockhart when describing her work. “We’re trying to engage people so that they are living out the gospel message of being Good News to the poor, feeding the hungry—and also raising questions about why people are hungry.”

**The oldest vocation in the book**

Lockhart is part of a wave of Catholic women living out their faith in the world. She joins a burgeoning number of women in the United States and worldwide who work for nonprofit organizations and volunteer for groups that address injustice through social activism. This career choice is not an arbitrary one; these women describe their work as a vocation. This is what God is calling them to do.

The phenomenon is not new. Women, Catholic or not, have always worked in hospitals, charities, churches, and schools, in both paid and unpaid positions. Women have also been leaders in social activism for more than a century. Consider abolitionists and the prohibition movement, the women’s suffrage movement, the civil rights movement, and the Catholic Worker movement.

Part of what’s different today is that there are more nonprofits than ever before, affording more opportunities for leadership and service. According to a 2012 study by the Johns Hopkins Nonprofit Economic Data Project, between 2000 and 2010 the nonprofit sector added 2 percent more jobs every year. This is more than double the growth of the for-profit world, which shrunk 0.5 percent per year over the same time period—and significantly more during the recession. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2014, nonprofits alone accounted for 5.3 percent of the total gross domestic product.

Women increasingly lead these nonprofits, according to the Cashwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at the University of Notre Dame. This is a trend that builds upon the past; there is an ancient tradition of Catholic women creating a place for themselves in religious orders—the original nonprofits, if you will—separate from being mothers, daughters, or wives. Whether Beguines or Benedictines, the church has always had strong women leaders.

Today, this hasn’t changed. Women are still leading much of Catholic life in the United States. In January last year, Dominican Sister Donna Markham became president of Catholic Charities, the largest Catholic charity in the United States. She joined two other high-profile women at the very top of large Catholic organizations: Carolyn Woo, president of Catholic Relief Services, and Daughters of Charity Sister Carol Kuehen, the CEO of the Catholic Health Association of the United States, one of the largest nonprofit health care providers in the country.

While women have been there all along, what is changing is the visibility of women in nonprofit vocations. Even today, women are CEOs in only 35 percent of large nonprofits. However, more and more Catholic young women are dedicating their lives toward helping others in the nonprofit sector.

**Training to serve**

Some of the most articulate and committed activists and nonprofit leaders are women coming out of theological degree programs. Krista Kutz, who attended the Divinity School, which is not affiliated with one religion. She chose this program, rather than a Catholic one, because she had a “sneaking suspicion” that there would be issues discussed in a diverse, open Catholic setting that she’d never thought about in her Catholic upbringing.

“It was inspiring to be challenged by people who were very different than me,” Kutz says. “And it confirmed my suspicions that there were issues of justice and leadership that I hadn’t heard discussed. Not because they would have been off limits, but because topics like juggling family responsibilities were not preach.”

Kutz, 29, knew she had good leadership skills and she was passionate about theology. Her belief in her leadership abilities was affirmed during her time in divinity school, but she began to question working for the Catholic Church. “I can’t tell you how many times I was told, ‘the Episcopal Church welcomes you,’” she says. “I was encouraged to consider leadership outside the Catholic tradition.”

She was tempted to switch denominations. “I wanted to be around women who were ordained, who were LGBT,” she says, referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people. “I wanted to continue to be inspired by their example.”

Kutz, however, says she is who she is because of her Catholic faith. She remains Catholic, but after graduation she didn’t last long working at a Catholic parish. She decided to work in the secular nonprofit sector.

When choosing a career path, Kutz kept in mind the advice of her professors and counselors at the University of Chicago Divinity School. They consistently told her (and other female students) to be picky about her future job and to be an empowered leader. “I wasn’t encouraged to look at particular job titles. Even today, women are often given ‘career and what she still believes in after taking a master’s degree in pastoral studies from Loyola University Chicago’s Institute of Pastoral Studies, Lackie spent six months in Kutz, however, says she is who she is because of her Catholic faith. She remains Catholic, but after graduation she didn’t last long working at a Catholic parish. She decided to work in the secular nonprofit sector.

The same skills that help a tax lawyer for a 25 years, would rather focus on skill sets—accountability, focus, and discipline—rather than proclivities toward leadership. These hardheaded virtues were what she practiced in her for-profit career and what she still believes in after steering her life in a new direction 10 years ago.

After earning a master’s degree in pastoral studies from Loyola University Chicago’s Institute of Pastoral Studies, Lackie spent six months in Kutz, however, says she is who she is because of her Catholic faith. She remains Catholic, but after graduation she didn’t last long working at a Catholic parish. She decided to work in the secular nonprofit sector.

She now works on the development team at an organization she describes as radically inclusive and empowering. The Night Ministry, a nonprofit that provides housing and health care to people in Chicago suffering from homelessness. “It’s exciting, challenging work,” Kutz says. “It’s not a Catholic organization, but it’s Matthew 25: ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

**Differences seen differently**

Historically, women in the Catholic Church are more likely than men to be drawn to work in the nonprofit sector. Lockhart thinks that this may be because of how women are socialized. “Women are better at recognizing our interconnection and relationships as opposed to the individual,” she says. “Our culture is so oriented towards individual achievement. I’d rather concentrate on the connection to something larger.”

On the other hand, Carol Lackie, a successful corporate tax lawyer for 25 years, would rather focus on skill sets—accountability, focus, and discipline—rather than proclivities toward leadership. These hardheaded virtues were what she practiced in her for-profit career and what she still believes in after steering her life in a new direction 10 years ago.

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**“I’m drawn to work for justice issues because I was formed in the belief that all people are created in the likeness of God.”**
her studies at Loyola. As a lawyer, her job had been to understand a problem and then fix it. As a spiritual director, her job is to listen. “It changed my perspective profoundly,” she says. “Part of everyone’s day should be spent in service—even if it’s just listening to someone who’s had a bad day. You don’t walk into every situation with the responsibility to fix it. Sometimes, your responsibility should be just to listen. We don’t do that enough. It’s different than the social activist persona. Most of us are not called to lead the charge, but we are all called to listen quietly to others, to share pain.”

Kathy McGourty, a graduate of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, agrees that often just standing with others in solidarity is an important part of the job description. It’s part of her work supporting Haitian coffee growers on the board of Just Haiti, Inc.

“There are two ways that we respond to God’s love and God’s call in the world around us,” McGourty says. “That’s what I think responsibility means. It comes from respond, and it is how we respond to the needs of the world around us. The two ways to respond are charity and justice. Charity is meeting the immediate need. Justice is changing the system that creates that need. I think nonprofit work can fall into both categories, but I think social activism generally falls into the category of justice, an active pursuit of changing an unjust policy or system.”

Why to change the world

McGourty, who was a full-time, stay-at-home parent for 25 years, is confident and joyful about her work with Just Haiti today, but her journey to divinity school began with anger.

In the early 2000s she was so enraged with God’s love and God’s call in the world around us,” McGourty says. “That’s what I think responsibility means. It comes from respond, and it is how we respond to the needs of the world around us. The two ways to respond are charity and justice. Charity is meeting the immediate need. Justice is changing the system that creates that need. I think nonprofit work can fall into both categories, but I think social activism generally falls into the category of justice, an active pursuit of changing an unjust policy or system.”

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“In the first time I traveled to Haiti in 2011, I knew I was meeting family,” she says. “Attending divinity grad school affirmed what I had known most of my life: that I am a cocreator in this world, with God’s guidance, and that living in solidarity is an authentic way to live. Affirming that and making that voice stronger empowered me to look for opportunities to live that. That was how I was encouraged to look for the work I do.”

Like Kutz, McGourty says that her years at Catholic Theological Union helped her realize she could live an authentic, mindful life and be in touch with who she was. “You have to prioritize, not do work that numbs you,” she says, adding that she understands what a luxury it is for her to be able to do that kind of work.

A religious vocation

McGourty, Kutz, Lackie, and Cory Lockhart all express gratitude for jobs that allow them to do work that is a service to others—and at the same time give them the opportunity for spiritual growth.

“If I look back over my experience in life, I see a trajectory of increased self-knowledge and spirituality,” Lackie says. “Loyola taught me more about my own self journey than about being a minister.”

Lockhart is equally thankful, although this gratitude is combined with the pain she feels from being with those who are oppressed. For her, part of her spiritual and vocational journey meant coming to a more mature understanding of what this pain meant.

She still remembers the guilt she felt as a teen in El Salvador. In 1992. She’d gone there with her parents as part of one of the first Just Faith efforts. They visited the church where soldiers assassinated St. Oscar Romero in 1980, and they visited the place where a death squad had murdered six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter in 1989. U.S.-trained soldiers were implicated in both killings.

“We know you don’t support that,” the people reassured her.

But she felt guilty all the same. Today she has a different understanding of what she felt as a 19-year-old in El Salvador. “Maybe responsibility is a better way to describe the interconnectedness I felt,” she says.

Franciscan Sister Ilia Delio is a theologian and scientist, as well as the director of the Catholic Studies Program at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. In her latest book, Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness, she uses the word entanglement to describe the same feeling of responsibility that Lockhart feels. “Baptism,” Delio writes, “is initiation into entanglement…we’re ‘put out’ Christ.”

Entanglement, responsibility, interconnectedness: Whatever words you use, it’s all a blessing, Lockhart says. “We’re not meant to have those gifts so we can stick them in a closet and be done. We’re meant to be vessels; blessings shouldn’t stop with us, but flow through us so we can be blessings to others.”

“Part of everyone’s day should be spent in service—even if it’s just listening to someone who’s had a bad day. You don’t walk into every situation with the responsibility to fix it. Sometimes, your responsibility should be just to listen.”

“Charity is meeting the immediate need. Justice is changing the system that creates that need.”