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I never signed up to teach English classes. Yet when a deficit of volunteers and a surplus of students at the neighborhood center where I minister necessitated a teacher for another class, I found myself stepping in as an instructor on the fly. As Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick said of our sisters in 1847 when we first came to Philadelphia from St. Louis, they are truly "ready for any good work."

This past week, it seemed like any and every good work that could demanded my time. In the midst of it all, our Founders' Day (Oct. 15) came to pass, and I found myself in class at the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey, rather than at our motherhouse, celebrating.

Disappointed, I came to class less than thrilled by the prospect of teaching. I would have much rather been celebrating with the larger community than looking over lesson plans and preparing for basic English class. My mind kept on wandering to the community gathered to mark the occasion. I wished I could be there with them, and yet I wasn't.

Taking a deep breath, I put those thoughts aside as the first students walked into class. The next hour and a half would be a whirlwind. By the time we emerged from our lesson, there were cheerful smiles and promises to be back for class later in the week.

After class, I sat with one of our volunteers, debriefing the night. An associate of our congregation, she had raised the issue of the conflict with Founders' Day at the teacher orientation meeting a month before.

At the time, we'd discussed the difficulty the scheduling conflict posed. On the one hand, we wanted to celebrate with the congregation at large; on the other hand, canceling class for the night only a few weeks into the semester would be disruptive to our students. Together, we agreed it was best to skip the celebration in favor of continuity.

Yet even though we'd agreed on this decision, the sacrifice still stung that night as we came to class rather than the communal celebration.

"I have to admit, I missed the celebration," I said with honest acceptance. My friend nodded in agreement.

Then I heard words come out of my mouth that I hadn't expected. "I'm glad I was here, though. This is where our founders would have wanted me to be ... working side-by-side with a mother of two struggling to master her numbers in English so that eventually, she can learn enough English to talk to her children's teachers at school."

The volunteer smiled warmly. "You bet. Those first women wouldn't have wanted us to be anywhere else. In fact, they probably would have been sitting right there beside us if they could."

That, after all, is what our founders, no matter the congregation, called for: a spirit ready for any good work — ready to serve, to love and to live the Gospel without boundaries.

Remembering that call is the first step in more fully living it out; the first step in fostering and furthering the mission we have committed ourselves to, to becoming founders for the future.

Such a call requires a remembering of the past, an engagement in the present, and a desire for the future. There is no clear road map for such living, but if my experience in the classroom is any indication, flexibility certainly stands as a paramount virtue of firm foundations for the future.

My life these days has become a crash course in flexible foundations. Only a few weeks into the semester and a few years into the process of establishing this new sponsored ministry, I can see the spirit of our founders at work and the lessons of foundation-building at work within me.

No matter my expectations (or lack thereof), there's always room for surprise. The ability to adjust to such uncertainty, to "go with the flow" and trust the Spirit, is key to success. It is an uneasy state of being. Rote answers and saccharine platitudes are contentious rather than comforting. The push within me is to seek solid ground, with the firmest foundations coming from the honest pursuit of mission in the everyday, lived reality of life.

The honesty of this pursuit of mission is that it is imperfect. That imperfection is humbling. To trust the Spirit is to quickly realize you aren't in control. As much as you might want a specific outcome or desire a certain course of events, no formulation is a failsafe path to your desired outcome. Formulaic foundations can come off as contrived and overbearing. Yes, we must plan for the future, but some of the greatest planning allows us to let reality, relationships and individuals breathe life into the structures set forth.

Thus, we lay groundwork on which something, perhaps unknown even to us, can be built. To do so, we must ask ourselves: "What is the goal of this undertaking?" "What is the foundation we hope to build on?" "What do we hope to embody in this endeavor?"

We must plan with an eye toward flexibility, doing the deep inner work of personal and communal reflection that allows a structure to flex rather than falter. This requires listening attentively — not only to the Spirit within me/us, but also to the Spirit among us, the Spirit that speaks in the voices of those with whom we journey.

When we were first beginning the SSJ Neighborhood Center, people in the neighborhood as well as our sisters wondered aloud what the center would be. The voices that stood out in these conversations were not those that gave pat answers or proposed old models; the outstanding voices were those who wanted to invest in a vision that, although uncertain at times, sought to do what our first sisters did: meet the needs most pressing in the community.

Each day, we encounter new neighbors who take the step of making such an investment. By sharing their lives, asking for help, naming desires and offering a friendly welcome, these neighbors enter into relationship and become co-founders of a place rooted in relationship. At times, this is an effortless act, like when a community member finds a prayerful place of sharing in which to speak his truth through stories from his childhood.

Other times, the hurdles of cultural differences and lingual divides can make the very act of communicating difficult. In this space, flexibility and humility are key. No one is better than the other; we are simply journeyers seeking understanding and trying to connect for a common good. Without a common language, you come to understand that compassion is a universal language. We need one another for this to work. As much as I can teach, I must also be willing and open to learn.

This brings us to one of the most vital lessons of laying foundations: Failure is always part of the option.

"What feels like failure in the moment is an opportunity for growth," I wrote earlier in the process of setting up this new ministry. "With any luck, as we free ourselves and our institutions to fail, we will discover a new form of success: success in faithfulness to the Spirit, that far exceeds anything we could ever accomplish on our own."

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Like the students I teach, I recognize that faithfulness helps lay a firm foundation. We can't fear failure. Instead, we must embrace it as a step toward progress. Each step, no matter how big or small, is taken in vulnerability. We risk so that we can grow, and in growing, we are made more flexible, stretched by the call of commitment and grounded in the grace of our foundational call.

This is what our first sisters did as they founded ministries and strived to live out the call planted in their hearts. They were grounded in God's call to actively live the Gospel, and with that firm foundation, they were able to face the trials and tribulations of doing something new. Time and again, they were ready for any good work. Their example and the many needs of our day compel us to do the same: choosing not to fear failure, to practice flexibility, and to remain faithful to those who've come before us and the Spirit that calls us forward.

[A Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, Colleen Gibson is the author of the blog Wandering in Wonder and has been published work in various periodicals including America, Commonweal and Give Us This Day. She currently serves as coordinator of services at the SSJ Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey.]