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Letter of Recommendation for:
John Atlee Horner
by: COAR Peace Mission,
Mary Stevenson
July 30, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am writing to whole-heartedly recommend John Atlee Horner, III, for ministry in the UCC and the entire body of Christ. Since I am not a member of the UCC I cannot put my recommendation into terms intimately familiar to the UCC. Rather, I would like to put it in terms of Christ-centered, compassionate, service to the poor and his fellow workers, grounded in personal integrity, personal growth, and the tradition of Liberation Theology with which I am familiar.

I have been Executive Director of the COAR Peace Mission since 2004. COAR stands for the Community of St. Oscar A. Romero. The COAR Peace Mission (COARPM), located outside Cleveland, is the North American outreach and development office for the COAR Children's Village (COARCV) located in Zaragoza, El Salvador. The COARCV was founded as an orphanage at the beginning of El Salvador's civil war in 1980 by Rev. Kenneth Myers, a priest of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, OH, who was working on the Diocese's mission there. Since the end of the war in 1992, COARCV has continued to serve impoverished children in El Salvador through its foster care homes (50 children ages 10-20), school (approx. 900), clinic (50 patients/week), and other programs. COARCV has always been owned by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Salvador. From 1982-2009

Sheltering, educating, and healing children for El Salvador's future since 1980



COARCV was administered by the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, Houston, TX (CCVI). Administration reverted to the Archdiocese in 2009.

I have known John since 2005 when he was a Spanish teacher at Gilmour Academy, where he volunteered to help us translate 500+ letters from the COARCV children to their sponsors in North America. For the next six years, on a case-by-case basis, as I brought them to him, he cheerfully helped with every request for translation. He also moved beyond that to help us all translate the culture, context, and nuance of our interactions with the COARCV's staff. He designed and supervised many week-long trips of student and parish service groups.

In 2009 we had a crisis of change in Director at the COARCV when the CCVI sisters left. It is no exaggeration to say that John saved the entire institution by offering to go to the COARCV and work with the transitional staff for most of 2010. He continued volunteering in various capacities until 2012, when he was hired as part-time staff. When the nuns left the COARCV, their role as bilingual, bicultural, and technically competent management staff shifted to our COARPM office in Cleveland. This shift had to happen if the mission was to survive. But it could not have happened without John's recognition of this, his competence, and his willingness to forge this new aspect of our mission as events progressed. This is the role he established while a full-time employee from 2016-2019.

John's skills as a translator, writer, and speaker for COAR are key to our success. As an employee he maintained the highest professional standards of teamwork, punctuality, and responsiveness as demands on the office changed. He was proactive and set his own agenda in management decisions about the COARCV. He was self-directed, but all the while communicated what he was doing with me and our Board of Directors.

But it is his qualities beyond the workplace that elevate my experience with John to ministry. I can best describe it by explaining his ministry to each of the different groups, below.

The COARCV management: As I stated earlier, when the nuns who had run COARCV for 27 years resigned, it was a time of crisis. That crisis started in 2007 when a new Sister was assigned as Director with instructions to reduce staff and spending in preparation for their departure in 2009. This caused unrest among the COARCV staff that I could not easily evaluate. John agreed to spend a month at COARCV in that summer of 2007. He reported what the staff was observing and saying so that I could make informed reports to the Board. Because of his language and cultural skills, he was able to enter those discussions with nuance and depth. More importantly, he was drawn to understand what was happening on every level. It was the beginning of what I would truly call his "ministry" at COARCV and to all of us. The COARCV staff felt "heard". His reports to me were



extremely detailed and full of his own qualifications of what he felt were motivations behind decisions and behavior that offended many. Yet, he tried to understand the management's point of view, too. Maintaining balance and fairness in that situation was difficult, but he did it. He never fell prey to the "white savior" syndrome, nor the, "know-it-all-gringo" syndrome that often plague foreign missions. He increasingly sought advice from our Board members who have served in El Salvador for many years. He entered into their wisdom about Salvadoran and developing world culture. He recognized and entered into the spirit of solidarity, subsidiarity, and self-abnegation that Liberation Theology and the history of western missions in the developing world have long understood. The members of the CLAM Team had gained this wisdom at great cost since 1964, culminating in the ultimate example of sacrifice of the Four North American Churchwomen who were abducted, tortured, and murdered in El Salvador on December 2, 1980. Two of those women, Sr. Dorothy Kazel, OSU, and Jean Donovan, helped to found COARCV, though, they did not know it at the time of their work with refugee orphans. More importantly for COARCV, the CLAM Team stayed on in El Salvador, responding to the need, setting an example of commitment and service. John synthesized these aspects of COAR's history and reality into his own approach to ministry and mission throughout his service to COAR.

The COARCV children: His approach to the children of COARCV surprised me. It was all child-like delight and understanding. He bought them a big screen TV and DVDs to go with it. He knew I would not approve of it, so he did it with his own money and risked my opprobrium. Yet, it was the best thing that happened to the children, and the staff. They need the exposure to TV and movies. It became a focal point for the staff to teach responsibility with a reward for good behavior - to watch TV for a few hours each weekend. That was vital. It also became a focus for student-leadership to emerge. The children formed a committee with representatives elected by each house to take responsibility for discipline and reward and deciding what to watch as enrichment. John never looked for thanks or credit from the children, staff, or me.

COARCV Visitors: John had many years' experience leading student groups abroad with all of the group dynamics and drama they often bring. At COARCV these groups were of mixed ages and circumstances including adults, none of whom were bound by school discipline or accountability. Additionally, they confronted disconcerting poverty, a complicated political past vis-à-vis the US, and deep questions of the efficacy and expectations around "service". John engaged those discussions deeply and sincerely, provoking thoughts and reflections that have stayed with many visitors all of these years since. He challenged the guests with the ideals of Liberation Theology and social justice to evaluate poverty and service here at home, too. He felt bound to make the experience deeply spiritual and did not take refuge in a passive, non-confrontational style.



Me: John's relationship with COAR evolved over these past 15 years and he took me along in that evolution. We both began focused on the financial and daily business tasks and goals. As the staff at the COARCV changed, we discovered that we could not remain passive oversight. John was the first to see that we needed to respond to their changes and seek solutions to their problems. Our discussions delved deeply into our motives and responsibilities. That was his ministry to me. Without those discussions I could never have come as far as I have in understanding and articulating our mission, its goals, and its limitations. That ministry was on an intellectual level as well as a personal spiritual level. I was at risk of being so overwhelmed and discouraged that I thought about leaving. Instead John reminded me, honestly, openly, and enthusiastically that we were working for the very mission that we both had hoped to in our lives. That may sound obvious, but it wasn't at the time, and his evolution to that understanding brought me along the same path.

The COARPM staff: Similarly, John has ministered to the other staff in the local, Cleveland, office. We are usually a staff of 3-4, two part-time, two full-time. John evolved from strictly professional support to a caring sounding board, mentor, and friend. But he was always open about the spirituality that underpinned his thoughts, inviting all to engage and challenge him. It created an atmosphere of humility and trust that could otherwise have felt foreign and intimidating to young summer office staff. He again applied Liberation Theology to the very granular and personal. Members of our staff, through the years, have carried the scars and burdens of inequality that is present in the US. John recognized those wounds and responded in Christian charity, yes, but also out of a sense of responsibility to restore a just society where people need not sustain these wounds.

COAR Stakeholders: We are a Catholic institution and John respects that. He has always said that our values are consonant with his own. We are more than a simple charity; we are an expression of religious and spiritual values with the hope that these will serve Christ and make the world the better place that we are called to pursue. He incorporated our mission and values into all written and spoken communications. John took on writing the opening prayer of our Board meetings. John has written the bulk of our newsletter, Facebook, and blog articles for our donor base. He is our voice to many of our stakeholders.

Style: Again, I've never had to write a letter like this. But it occurs to me that ministry "style" is relevant to the decision you are making. I'm guessing that there is room for many styles in your house and not every congregant responds equally well to every style. I suspect that styles can shift over time with pastoral circumstances, age, and life-situation. John is not a grandfatherly, gentle, arm-chair pastor type. John reacts to injustice and inequality. John confronts dishonesty and apathy. While his style is energetic, he always



combines it with a willingness to listen and learn. He has always welcomed constructive criticism. He recognizes gentle souls who are fragile and treats them with care. He has been open and enthusiastic about his call to ministry for the past several years and has invited feedback from everyone of our staff and Board, so he is not afraid to be vulnerable.

I have no hesitation in recommending John A. Horner as a candidate for ministry. If you recommend him for ministry in the UCC you will augment his already considerable ability to serve the world.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mary K. Stevenson".

Mary K. Stevenson
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