

Casey Center for Faith and Community Services

University Partnerships

Edmundite Missions is a Catholic nonprofit that has been serving Selma, Alabama and surrounding rural areas for over 87 years. These areas are among the poorest in the nation, with disability, diabetes, and early death rates in excess of national or even Alabama averages. Poor educational performance impedes economic growth, and unemployment rates remain in the double digits. The E2 tornado that touched down in central Selma on January 12, 2023 only compounded the problems. Meanwhile, poverty, poor nutrition, illness, and unemployment in rural areas are worse than in Selma, with few options for economic advancement. Yet, rural economic development in the Deep South finds few advocates or supporters in policy halls.

The Missions programs range across the full sweep of community development including education, workforce development, health and wellness, and nutrition. A focus in rural areas on restoring Black small farmers to market-level production is a critical part of the economic strategy. Yet, the Catholic moral compass always dictates that, even where solutions can be put in place, service to the impoverished, to the poorest of the poor, must always be retained. And both service and solutions must emphasize and reinforce the dignity of individuals and the community. This combination of service to the poorest and solutions for sustainable economic self-reliance for individuals and families is a hallmark of the Missions.

The Missions is becoming a field-site partner for higher education institutions around the country, particularly Catholic colleges and universities. The goal of this partnership approach is to contribute in a meaningful way to the scholarship on poverty solutions in rural areas while simultaneously creating the next generation of citizens committed to Catholic Social Justice and leadership in American civil society. In its university partnerships, the Missions is not just a volunteer site. It is a full partner in the learning process for students and can be a partner in the academic research process as well. In so doing, the Missions wishes to underscore Catholic leadership in developing sustainable solutions to deep poverty, as well as in reinforcing the commitments of the next generation to social justice and active leadership in civil society.

The Casey Center for Faith and Community Service, named after Edmundite Missions founder Fr. Frank Casey, S.S.E., is the anchor for that effort. The Casey Center is located on the Missions campus in Selma and includes 8 ensuite double bedrooms and two supervisors' suites plus a full kitchen, dining room, library, and community room. The Center serves as a resource both for student learning groups and for research teams whose experiential learning ranges from a week to several months.

Experiential learning and research visits include orientation to poverty and the rural and small town south, with Selma and its surrounding counties as an example, participation in the work of the Missions, especially in health, wellness, nutrition and education service provision programs. Engagement might include

- working in our rural food market and in our farmers' market in Selma
- developing and implementing programs in our two community centers
- serving meals and delivering meals to the homebound
- mentoring students in our education programs

This engagement in the work of the Missions would be accompanied by with community members and local leaders about the complexity of both the problems faced by these regions and the complexity of solutions. Research projects could run across the range of problems underpinning the economic challenges of the Deep South. Working from the assets of the Missions, examples might include

- The demographics of poverty in the Deep South and the future of younger generations
- Transportation barriers and innovative solutions to access to jobs, education and markets
- Knowledge and attitudes about investments in personal futures in a setting of five generations of poverty with the vestiges of racism
- Policy levers that are not being used in small towns and rural counties that might re-ignite public sector action and/or policy levers currently being used that impede budgetary commitments
- Public budget allocation and management
- The role of nonprofits as community intermediaries and services providers, and how that role can lead not to nonprofit dependence but rather to self-reliance that reduces the need for nonprofit support.

The Missions seeks long-lasting partnerships with universities that create a flow of students and professors over time at a level that make a lasting difference in the lives of those who learn, experience and study the problems of economic development in rural and small towns of this nation.

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