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Original Article

## Motivations of Volunteers Undertaking Work at Mission Stations

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A – Study design; B – Data collection; C – Statistical analysis; D – Interpretation of data; E – Preparation of the manuscript;  
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### Abstract

**Objective of the study:** The article aimed to conduct a qualitative analysis of motivation and show its structure among women who participated in foreign missionary volunteering. **Method:** Qualitative research was conducted among women who are believers and practice their faith. Ten women, aged 23 to 37, participated in the study. All were born and live in Poland. All participated in missionary volunteering abroad. The research tool was a narrative interview script based on McAdams's approach. This method focuses on personal narratives, i.e., how people tell their life stories, make sense of their experiences, and interpret them. **Results:** Qualitative analysis of narrative interviews revealed that the motivations of women volunteering for missionary work were complex, multidimensional, and dynamically structured within their life stories. No single dominant motive was identified. The most central dimension was spiritual and religious motivation, expressed in a sense of calling and response to God's presence. Participants described their decision as the result of a long-term process of spiritual discernment, rooted in personal faith, prayer, and religious formation. A second key dimension was altruistic motivation, specifically the desire to help others, share, and build meaningful relationships. Developmental and travel-related motivations also emerged, although they played a complementary rather than primary role. These included the desire to gain new experiences, develop professional and interpersonal skills, learn languages, and experience different cultures. However, participants clearly distinguished their involvement from „volunteering,” emphasizing service over personal gain. The results also indicate that prior life experiences, such as involvement in religious communities and previous volunteering, significantly influenced their decision to engage in missionary work. Participating in missionary volunteering contributed to deeper personal growth, increased self-awareness, strengthened interpersonal skills, and deepened spirituality. Upon return, participants reported both positive transformations (greater appreciation of life, redefinition of values) and challenges (difficulty adapting, feeling misunderstood, and reverse culture shock). **Conclusion:** An analysis of the volunteering landscape indicates the need for a comprehensive approach to preparing missionary volunteers. Training should combine spiritual elements with psychoeducation and intercultural training. Equally important is post-return support, which includes mentoring, support groups, and supervision, as well as activities that help translate missionary experiences into daily life. Based on this analysis, we can propose an original concept for an integrated model of missionary motivation, in which the religious-spiritual, altruistic, developmental, and cognitive dimensions form a coherent whole.

**Keywords:** motivation, missionary volunteering, Polish women

Volunteering is one of the most sincere and selfless forms of engagement – a space where values, meaning, and a willingness to act for the benefit of others converge (Ariza-Montes, 2017). It is based on the volunteer's free will and takes the form of conscious, altruistic activity motivated by concern for others, regardless of their social or cultural identity (Muchacki et al., 2020). These characteristics are particularly evident in missionary volunteering, where the work requires openness, a high degree of flexibility, sensitivity to cultural differences, and a willingness to make sacrifices (Mich, 2016).

In this context, missionary volunteering represents a unique form of service. It combines elements of spirituality, altruism, and community work, in which volunteers undertake unpaid work in remote parts of the world, often in challenging and uncomfortable conditions (Buttler, 2018). The decision to go on a mission involves reflecting on one's own motivations, particularly religious and spiritual ones. This forms the foundation of such activities. In the realities of the modern world, dominated by haste and the pursuit of success, the decision to sacrifice one's time and comfort for the sake of others takes on particular significance and becomes a phenomenon worthy of in-depth analysis (Bomber, 2017).

Previous research into volunteer motivation has focused primarily on volunteers' motivations, such as altruism, personal development, the desire to gain professional experience, or personal fulfilment (Chen et al., 2022). In contrast, spiritual and religious aspects, despite their particular significance in secular activities as well, often remain marginalised. The literature also contains critical voices pointing to the existence of ambivalent motivations, such as the desire for prestige, gain, escape from everyday life, or treating mission trips as a form of religious tourism (Mich, 2016).

Given the interest many people have in missionary tourism, it is advisable to explore the motivations that lead volunteers to decide to undertake a long-term missionary trip. Previous research has focused particularly on altruistic and development-related aspects, overlooking the significance of religious motivations. Therefore, it is crucial to pay attention to religious and spiritual motivations and their coexistence with developmental, travel, and social motivations. Empirical analysis based on the narrative interview method allows for capturing the subjective experiences of the participants. The study participants are religious and practicing women living in Poland. It is suggested that this analysis will reveal the structure of volunteers' motivations and how missions shape their attitudes, spiritual lives, and activities for others.

## Motivations

The concept of motivation refers to the forces that initiate, direct, and sustain an individual's behaviour. It is a complex process of behavioural regulation, encompassing both the choice of goals and the means of achieving them (Pawłowska, 2009; Zimbardo & Gerrig, 2010). Motivation is a multidimensional phenomenon. Researchers point out that human behaviour never stems from a single cause. It is the result of the interaction of various motives: conscious and unconscious, individual and social (Reykowski, 1998). The literature indicates that numerous typologies of motivation have been developed, each emphasising different aspects of the motivational process.

Yeung (2004) notes that volunteers' motivations are not static, but are shaped by cultural and situational contexts as well as individual experiences. He points to a continuum of motivations ranging from selfish (e.g., the desire to gain experience, personal satisfaction) to spiritual (e.g., the need for meaning, self-actualisation, or religious development). Chen et al. (2022) argue that volunteers are motivated by both the need to serve others and the desire for self-actualisation. Nalichaeva et al. (2021) note that compassion, empathy, and the desire to help often go hand in hand with developmental motives. These include gaining professional experience, boosting self-esteem, and the need to be appreciated.

Spiritual motivations, on the other hand, form the foundation of the decision to go on a mission (Morawski, 2012). Participants often view missions as a response to a personal calling, a desire to proclaim the Gospel, and to strengthen their bond with God. This inner sense of mission is often linked to altruism through a desire to share the love and goodness received. Spirituality strengthens determination, provides a sense of purpose, and validates the decision to undertake missionary work (Deci & Ryan, 2012). In the context of missionary volunteering, spirituality plays both a motivating and a sustaining role (Olczyk, 2018).

Religious motivations are of a personal (e.g., the desire to draw closer to God, the search for meaning, spiritual growth) and communal nature (participation in the Church's mission, responsibility for the community of believers) (Mich, 2016). In practice, they coexist with the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as well as basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2012). For many volunteers, it is precisely this convergence of spiritual and psychological motivations that fosters long-term service in difficult conditions.

Research shows that religiously motivated actions foster the development of prosocial attitudes (e.g., empathy, responsibility) and soft skills (cooperation, communication, coping with stress) (Bomber, 2017). At the same time, missionary engagement leads to a re-evaluation of goals, a redefinition of identity and sense of purpose (Omoto & Snyder, 2002). This formative dimension links spirituality

with personal and social development. Volunteers report greater openness towards others and sensitivity to global issues. Confrontation with cultural differences fosters deeper reflection on one's own faith and develops intercultural competencies: tolerance, empathy, and the ability to engage in dialogue (Francis, 2013; Krakowiak, 2013).

Missionary volunteering, alongside core spiritual motivations, often also involves individual motivations that are autotelic in nature, as well as those related to travel and personal development. Autotelic motivations refer to actions undertaken for their own sake, without the expectation of external rewards (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In this context, missionary volunteering can be seen as a space for self-fulfilment, testing one's own capabilities, or experiencing a sense of purpose.

Travel- and development-related motivations, in turn, encompass the need to learn about different cultures, acquire new skills, and broaden one's horizons. In functional terms, this corresponds to the functions of 'understanding' and 'enhancement', i.e., the need to understand the world and develop one's own skills (Clary et al., 1999). These motivations are particularly significant in the case of international volunteering, which combines the aid dimension with the opportunity for cultural exploration (Yeung, 2004). Researchers, however, draw attention to the risk of a phenomenon known as 'voluntourism', i.e., a situation in which curiosity about travel overshadows altruistic and spiritual goals (Mich, 2016). In this sense, travel and development motivations should encompass other dimensions so that volunteering retains its formative and pro-social character.

Critics emphasise that in some cases, volunteer trips may focus more exclusively on personal experiences, exploring exotic cultures or building one's own experience, rather than on actually supporting the communities they are intended to support (Buttler, 2018). For this reason, the line between missionary work and tourism can be difficult to define.

## **Missionary Volunteering**

The definition of 'missionary volunteering' was proposed by Załuska (1996), who emphasised that volunteers forgo financial gain and rest to devote their time, energy, and knowledge to others. Similarly, Górski (2014) highlighted the voluntary nature, the fact that it is unpaid, and the awareness that the work is undertaken for the benefit of people outside one's circle of family and friends.

The specific nature of missionary volunteering stems from several factors. Firstly, it is often long-term in nature and takes place in countries in the Global South, where access to education, healthcare, and basic resources is limited (Kiciński, 2018). Secondly, the religious and spiritual dimension plays a key role. The trip is perceived not

only as aid work but also as a response to a calling (Kubiak, 2020). Thirdly, missions take place in intercultural environments, requiring flexibility and communication skills. Fourthly, the communal nature of missionary work is of significant importance, strengthening a sense of bond and responsibility (Mich, 2016).

Missionary volunteering in the Catholic Church is understood as a response to the Christian vocation to proclaim the Gospel and serve one's neighbour. John Paul II (1990) emphasised in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* that "missionary activity is a matter for all Christians", and not merely for the clergy. Pope Francis (2013), too, in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, reminds us that the lay believers are to be "missionary disciples" in their daily lives, and that their missionary activity is expressed not only in words but also in deeds of love.

In the Catholic context, this integration is part of an understanding of mission as a service that encompasses both the proclamation of the Gospel and a commitment to the social, educational, and health development of local communities (Congregation for the Evangelisation of the Peoples, 1998). This means that religious motivations do not exclude other dimensions, but complement them and give them a transcendent meaning.

The literature notes that missionary volunteers often perceive their departure as a concrete fulfilment of their vocation through the experience of "being sent" (Olczyk, 2018). This sense of mission is deeply personal in nature and links individual spiritual experience with the universal message of the Church.

Research on volunteering indicates that engagement rarely stems from a single factor. Omoto and Snyder (2002) note that motivations are multidimensional and often overlap (Sikora, 2020). In this context, spirituality and religiosity act as a catalyst that reinforces other motivations, such as altruism, the need for social connections, and personal development.

Morawski (2012) emphasises that in the case of missionary volunteering, spirituality and religiosity not only initiate the decision-making process but also sustain motivation in difficult conditions, making volunteering a space for personal and communal formation. This integrative approach is confirmed by the research of Saroglou (2013), who demonstrated that religiosity reinforces prosocial behaviour and facilitates the undertaking of actions requiring sacrifice.

Missionary volunteering requires significant sacrifice and a willingness to work in difficult conditions (Gil-Lacruz et al., 2019). It points to strong internal motivations (Mariański, 2010). Its unique character stems from the combination of a religious vocation with practical social action (Muchacki, 2020). The literature indicates that missionary volunteering constitutes a testimony of faith and a way of life stemming from a personal Christian vocation (Mich, 2016). At the same time, it serves as a space for social formation, the development of interpersonal and intercultural skills, and the strengthening of solidarity (Muchacki, 2020).

Research on volunteering emphasises that whilst external motivations may provide an important initial impetus, in the long term, internal motivations play a greater role in sustaining engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Occhipinti, 2016). In the case of missionary volunteering, both types of motivation often coexist. Internal motivations are linked to a spiritual calling, altruism, and the need to give meaning to one's own life. External motivations, on the other hand, manifest themselves in the pursuit of gaining experience, broadening professional skills, or social recognition. Their integration means that missionary volunteering becomes both a space for personal development and the realisation of social goals (Bekkers & Wierking, 2011; Omoto & Snyder, 2002).

A long-term stay in a different cultural environment is associated with a sense of isolation, acculturation stress, and difficulties in adapting. Berry (2005) describes acculturation stress as emotional tension resulting from confrontation with a new culture. Missionary volunteers sometimes experience frustration related to poverty, disease, or social exclusion. Volunteer burnout is a recurring phenomenon (Heist et al., 2021). Research indicates that initial enthusiasm is followed by fatigue, a decline in motivation, and spiritual crises (Bennett et al., 2018; Borroni, 2008). A lack of emotional support and an excessive workload sometimes lead to 'quiet quitting', which involves remaining formally in the project whilst showing limited commitment (Clary & Snyder, 1999). This phenomenon is often accompanied by withdrawal, reluctance, or resentment.

Operating in unfamiliar cultural environments confronts volunteers with language barriers, different traditions, and value systems. A lack of understanding of local customs can lead to a sense of alienation. On the other hand, confrontation with otherness fosters the development of intercultural competencies: empathy, openness, and adaptability (Bennett et al., 2018).

## Analyzed Problem

Empirical research conducted in various countries consistently shows that volunteers' motivations are multidimensional. Clary et al. (1998), in a quantitative study conducted on a sample of volunteers from non-profit organisations in the United States, demonstrated that the most common motivating factors were altruistic values, namely the desire to help others, concern for the community, and the pursuit of ethical convictions. In turn, the longitudinal panel studies by Omoto and Snyder (2002), involving volunteers from humanitarian organisations, showed that people who are guided by pro-social values are more likely to maintain a long-term commitment and undertake tasks requiring a great deal of dedication. Similar tendencies are confirmed by Yeung's (2004) research among medical volunteers in Hong Kong.

The respondents indicated that helping others gave them a sense of purpose in their work, satisfaction, and a greater sense of belonging to the community.

Research by Penner (2002) indicated that, alongside the desire to help others, opportunities for self-development, expanding one's skills, and learning teamwork were of significant importance. Similar results were obtained by Clary and Snyder (1999), who demonstrated that motivations related to career and personal development – though less frequently dominant – play an important role in sustaining long-term engagement. Yeung's (2004) research also showed that individuals seeking personal development were more likely to engage in intercultural initiatives requiring openness and communication skills.

Particular attention should be paid to research focusing on spiritual and religious motivations, which are of fundamental importance in the case of missionary volunteering. Kashirskaya (2023), in a study of Christian volunteers, demonstrated that most of them viewed their activities as the fulfilment of a religious calling, deepening their bond with God, and sharing their faith with others. Similar trends were confirmed by Michałowski and Mich (2016) in their study of participants in the Academic Missiological Circle (Club/Society) in Poznań. Missionary volunteering was perceived as a testimony of faith and an integral part of religious life, in which spiritual motivations coexisted with altruistic ones. In turn, Bomber's (2017) qualitative research conducted among missionary volunteers in the United Kingdom showed that spiritual motivations also serve as a psychological resource, strengthening resilience to stress and helping to cope with the difficulties arising from working in demanding conditions.

Petrovic et al.'s (2020) study showed that religiosity promotes engagement in volunteering more through the reinforcement of religious motives rather than social motives. Okun and Yeung (2015) confirmed that volunteers who described themselves as more religious were more likely to view volunteering as an opportunity to put their ethical and spiritual beliefs into practice than others.

The literature indicates that volunteers' motivations are multidimensional, combining altruistic, egoistic, developmental, and spiritual components (Bomber, 2017; Clary & Snyder, 1999; Okun et al., 2010). Despite this, there remains a lack of in-depth qualitative research on missionary volunteering. Available studies incorporating elements of religiosity, whilst valuable, remain fragmentary. Many of them involve small sample sizes and are quantitative in nature. They often concern volunteering in general, marginalising the religious and spiritual dimension. The few studies relating to missions focus mainly on organisational or altruistic issues. They rarely analyse the process of discerning a vocation or post-return experiences, which are crucial for missionary volunteers.

The lack of analysis regarding Polish female volunteers is particularly noticeable. Their motivations and biographical narratives remain poorly documented,

even though they constitute a significant portion of the missionary journey participants. This phenomenon deserves analysis. In societies dominated by individualism and consumerism, the decision to forgo comfort, career, and stability in favor of unpaid work in difficult conditions is a unique, countercultural choice. It is often downright shocking to those around them and their loved ones.

The commitment of female mission volunteers who decide to leave their country and undertake long-term, unpaid work in often difficult conditions raises questions about the sources and nature of their motivation. In the context of this research, particular attention has been paid to the religious and spiritual dimension, which is key to missionary service. At the same time, altruistic, travel-related, and personal development motivations have also been taken into account.

It is suggested that an analysis of these areas allows us to capture the multidimensional nature of the decisions made by female volunteers undertaking missionary work in various settings, operating under different social and cultural conditions. At the same time, it is assumed that different categories of motivation exist and complement one another. In addition to analysing the reasons behind the decision to go abroad, it is assumed that the missionary trip provided the volunteers with certain benefits and contributed to their transformation resulting from their involvement. It is also assumed that post-return reflections will indicate how volunteering influences the volunteers' identity and subsequent lives.

For this research project, the following research question has been formulated:

- 1) In what way did previous life experiences shape the volunteers' decision to go on a mission?
- 2) How do spiritual motivations and a sense of vocation influence the volunteers' decision to undertake missionary work?
- 3) What role do altruistic values and the desire to help others play in the decision to undertake missionary volunteering?
- 4) How do travel motivations and the need for personal and professional development influence the decision to participate in missionary volunteering?
- 5) What personal, spiritual, and professional benefits do volunteers gain from participating in long-term missionary volunteering?
- 6) What reflections do volunteers formulate upon their return, and what significance do these have for assessing the meaning and value of missionary volunteering?

## **Research Methodology**

This section presents the research methodology. It includes a profile of the volunteers, research questions, an interview script, and a description of the research procedure and research tools.

## Research Perspective

The analysis of missionary volunteers' motivations is situated within the framework of research on volunteering and theories of social and religious motivation (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Muchacki, 2020). This approach allows us to understand that missionary activity does not stem from a single cause, but is the result of the coexistence of many factors: spiritual, social, cultural, and developmental.

By adopting a perspective centred on the participants' experiences, it is crucial to capture the meanings that the volunteers themselves ascribe to their involvement in missions. The experience of long-term missionary volunteering facilitates a deeper understanding of the reality under study, yet requires maintaining a reflective stance and consciously separating the personal perspective from empirical analysis. The analysis is based on narrative interviews, which allow for the capture of individual interpretations of volunteering and the reconstruction of the dynamics of motivation within a biographical context.

## Characteristics of the Participants

The study involved ten women aged between 23 and 37 who had completed at least three months of missionary volunteer work at centres in South America or Africa. Participants were recruited through the Salesian Missionary Volunteer Programme "Młodzi Światu" ("Young People of the World") in Cracow and the Salesian Missionary Centre in Warsaw. The work carried out by the missionary volunteers was entirely unpaid, in keeping with the spirit of volunteering. Some volunteers went on missionary work twice. They had varied experiences in terms of both the length of their stay and the nature of the tasks they performed. The women came from different regions of Poland, from both cities and smaller towns, which allowed for a diverse perspective on missionary experiences. All women were born in Poland and grew up in a Catholic family. They consider themselves believers and practitioners. Here is a brief profile of the missionary volunteers who took part in the study.

1. Aneta (28) – a nurse from southern Poland, she has undertaken two missionary trips. In 2017, she spent a year in Bolivia, working in a children's home where she looked after the children and took part in daily educational activities. In 2019, she travelled to Ethiopia for two months, supporting nuns in their work at a medical clinic and putting her professional experience to use.
2. Ola (37) – office worker, married, on maternity leave. She volunteered in Uganda in 2015 and 2016, for three and five months, respectively. Her

- duties included supporting homeless boys staying at the centre and running educational activities for children, including holiday workshops.
3. Sylwia (27) – holds a Master’s degree in social rehabilitation pedagogy, whilst also studying for a postgraduate qualification and doing casual work. In 2023, she spent six months working in South Sudan in primary schools and a clinic run by the Salesian Sisters.
  4. Edyta (23) – a student of education from northern Poland, living with her parents. In 2023, she undertook a nine-month voluntary placement in Bolivia, where she worked with children in an orphanage, focusing on their upbringing and education. She is currently preparing for her next missionary trip.
  5. Marysia (30) – a graduate in business psychology, formerly a recruiter in a corporation, now a pilgrimage guide. Between 2021 and 2022, she spent two years in Bolivia: the first year in an orphanage run by nuns, and the second working with young people and pastoral groups within the parish.
  6. Weronika (24) – a student of education specialising in speech therapy and social communication. In 2022–2023, she undertook a year-long voluntary placement in Peru (Monte Salvado and Quebrada), supporting children and adolescents aged 12–17.
  7. Gabriela (31) – a graduate in economics, currently working in a corporate environment on a hybrid basis. In 2016, she spent a month in Cameroon at a school for deaf and disabled children, and in 2021, 10 months in Gambia, working in a school and an after-school club.
  8. Agnieszka (37) – a teacher and trained musician. Between 2021 and 2022, she spent a year in Peru (Lima) at a home for boys requiring constant care.
  9. Anna (36) – a psychologist, living with her parents. She spent a total of 10 months in Bolivia: eight months in Tupiza at a children’s home and two months in Santa Cruz, where she was transferred due to difficult relationships at her previous placement.
  10. Martyna (24) – a nursing graduate from Kraków, working in a hospital. Between 2022 and 2023, she spent a year in Peru (Monte Salvado, Cusco district), supporting a boarding school run by the Salesians.

## Interview Script

The original interview script was structured around six main thematic areas, corresponding to the research questions. This ensured coherence between the research subject and the collected empirical material. The individual areas covered the following topics:

a) Life and spiritual experiences before departure

The questions in this section concerned the participants' personal circumstances and their previous spiritual and social experiences. They enabled an understanding of the participants' individual life stories, as well as the factors that may have influenced their decision to undertake missionary volunteering. The reference point was the research question: how did previous life experiences shape the volunteers' decision to go on a mission?

b) Spiritual motivations and a sense of vocation led to the decision to go

This part of the interview focused on the personal understanding of spirituality and religiosity. The participants were asked to reflect on the role of faith, their experience of a calling, and the sense of purpose that accompanied their decision to go. This area relates directly to the question: how do spiritual motivations and a sense of calling influence the volunteers' decision to undertake missionary work?

c) Altruistic values and the need to help others

The next area concerned altruistic values, empathy, and the need for social engagement. The questions focused on sources of motivation linked to caring for others, a desire to support those most in need, and a sense of social responsibility. It addressed the question: What significance do altruistic values and the need to help others have in the decision to undertake missionary volunteering?

d) Motivation for travel and personal development

This section asked about the desire to travel, discover new cultures, learn languages, and gain life and professional experience. An important element was the analysis of how these factors supported or complemented religious and altruistic motivations. This relates to the research question: how do travel motivations and the need for personal and professional development influence the decision to participate in missionary volunteering?

e) Personal, spiritual, and professional benefits of volunteering

The questions in this section concerned the effects and consequences of participating in long-term missionary volunteering. The participants described the changes that had taken place in their personal, professional, and spiritual lives. This section addressed the question: What personal, spiritual, and professional benefits do volunteers gain from participating in long-term missionary volunteering?

f) Reflections after returning

The final area covered experiences related to returning from the mission: the adaptation process, the significance of the mission in the participants' life stories, and messages addressed to others. Analysis of this dimension allowed for an assessment of how the participants perceive the meaning and value of their volunteering experience. This relates to the research question: what post-return reflections do the volunteers formulate, and what significance do these have for assessing the meaning and value of missionary volunteering?

## Procedure and Research Tool

The research was qualitative in nature and was conducted using individual in-depth interviews in a narrative format. Due to the participants being spread across various regions of Poland and organisational difficulties, all interviews were conducted remotely – via an instant messaging platform with the camera switched on.

The interviews lasted between 1.5 and 5 hours, with the participants' consent, depending on their openness and willingness to share their experiences. During recruitment, certain difficulties were encountered – some people, despite having previously agreed, ultimately withdrew from participation, and with some interviewees, it was difficult to arrange a convenient time for the meeting. An additional challenge was the varied nature of the responses: some interviewees gave detailed, extensive, and reflective answers, whilst others provided more factual and concrete responses. This required flexibility in conducting the interviews and an individual approach to each volunteer. A semi-structured method based on the approach proposed by McAdams – *The Life Story Interview* (1995). This method focuses on personal narratives, that is, how people recount the story of their lives, assign meaning to their experiences, and interpret them. Hence, in line with McAdams's concept (1993), it was assumed that identity is shaped through the narrative of one's own life – through the way in which a person connects past, present, and future events into a coherent whole. This form of interview allowed participants to freely share their stories, whilst enabling the researcher to steer the conversation in situations requiring further exploration of specific themes.

## Presentation Findings

This section presents the results of the analysis of narrative interviews conducted with missionary volunteers discussing their experiences related to missionary trips. The presentation covers six main thematic areas that were discussed with the volunteers.

- a) life and spiritual experiences before departure,
- b) spiritual motivations and a sense of vocation led to the decision to go,
- c) altruistic values and the need to help others,
- d) motivation for travel and personal development,
- e) personal, spiritual, and professional benefits of volunteering,
- f) reflections after reading.

## Life and Spiritual Experiences Before Departure

The volunteers repeatedly emphasised that this choice was not a sudden, spontaneous decision or a random act. Rather, it was the result of a lengthy process of maturing towards the mission, rooted in their life stories, previous activities, often missionary involvement, and religious formation. Many participants indicated that the desire to go on a missionary trip had already emerged in childhood or adolescence. This was shaped by participation in the life of the Church. Joint prayers for vocations, catechesis, and community life encouraged discernment. This built the foundation upon which the decision to go abroad matured. Edyta says, “When I was a child and heard in church: ‘Let us pray for missionary vocations,’ my heart would always beat strongly. Even then, I felt that this might be something for me.” Aneta, meanwhile, recalls: “Ever since I was a teenager, I’ve had this desire within me to one day be a missionary volunteer. It matured alongside me.”

The women had often been involved in voluntary, charitable, or pastoral work beforehand, which enabled them to acquire the necessary skills – something that could be seen as preparation and a kind of ‘training ground’ ahead of their missions. As Marysia recalls: ‘I’d already been working with Caritas and in the parish. It felt so natural – since I was comfortable with it, I wanted more, something more challenging.’ Martyna adds: “During my studies, I started helping out at a community centre. That’s when I realised this was where I belonged – working with children, giving them my attention. The missions were simply the next step.”

Meetings with people who had missionary experience played a significant role. The testimonies of missionaries, lay missionaries, and post-mission volunteers during formation and community meetings inspired. Edyta recalls a meeting with a sister who had returned from Africa. “She told us how people live there and what daily work is like. I thought to myself then: I want to try it too.” Zofia recalls: “I had a friend who went to Peru for a year. As I listened to her stories, I became increasingly convinced that I wanted that too.” The idea of going abroad was often met with mixed reactions from family and friends. For some volunteers, the support was encouraging; for others, the lack of acceptance posed an additional challenge. Aneta says: “My parents were worried, but they said: ‘If this is your calling, give it a go’. That gave me a lot of strength.” Martyna recalls: “When my family found out I was leaving, there was a huge argument – they said I was selfish and self-centred, and that something bad could happen to me. It was awful.” Marysia’s friends reacted similarly: “My friends said: ‘Why do you need this? You can find a good job here’. But I felt I had to try, otherwise I’d regret it.”

## **Spiritual Motivations and a Sense of Vocation Led to the Decision to Go**

Underlying the inner conviction of the need to leave was faith, a belief in a calling and a divine vocation, and involvement in parish life contributed to an awareness of shared responsibility for the mission of the universal Church. A thematic analysis of this research topic constitutes a key focus of this study; hence, five main categories have been presented, illustrating various aspects of the volunteers' spiritual motivations.

### **Spiritual discernment and inner calling**

The participants' statements suggest that the decision to go was not the result of a spontaneous impulse, but of a long-term process of spiritual discernment. Aneta says, "It was also a discernment of my vocation", which was linked to an experience related to prayer. Ola adds, "I prayed, I reflected, and I felt inner peace and a sense that this was it." The volunteers emphasised that they felt their decision was a response to God's voice, and not merely the result of a personal need. The decision was well-considered and conscious, not random. Zofia recalls: "I knew that He was calling me. I wanted to show Him my love." Zofia interprets this as God's desire: "I knew that this was my desire, which I wanted to fulfil, and that it was also God's desire. I simply knew that I was going where God wanted me to go and would accept whatever came." Anna, on the other hand, says, "I see it as a calling. It gave me a sense of inner peace that I was doing something God was leading me to do."

It is clear from many of their accounts that this desire emerged as early as childhood and was deeply personal to them. Edyta says: "When I was a child and heard: 'Let us pray for new and holy missionary vocations', my heart would always beat strongly at those words, and I would think to myself that I would like to go on a mission one day. That was the first time I googled how to go on a mission."

### **The experience of God's presence and grace**

The participants repeatedly emphasised that the experience of God's presence and His guidance was a key factor in their decision to go on a mission. Aneta says, "The experience of God's presence was powerful, a strength from above to keep working, to give more and more of myself." As for Marysia: "I was amazed at how God works through the people I met. It was an experience of His presence that

strengthened me.” They saw the mission not so much as their own choice, but as a gift and a grace. Martyna notes, “I see it as a grace that I was able to go. Not everyone is given the chance to answer such a call.” Edyta sees the trip as an opportunity to respond to a call that appeared in their lives. “I felt that God was guiding me, that it wasn’t me who chose, but He who showed the way.” The decision was not viewed in terms of purely personal plans or ambitions, but as a response to God’s action. Weronika says, “I was convinced that it was no coincidence that I received the invitation. It was a grace and an answer to my prayers.” Agnieszka adds, “The trip was a confirmation for me that God is actively at work in my life, that He does not leave me on my own, but gives me the grace to fulfil this calling.”

### The search for meaning and an alternative way of life

For many of those surveyed, a mission trip was a way to break away from a consumerist lifestyle and seek a deeper meaning. Gabriela says, “For me, volunteering gives meaning to my life.” Volunteering is understood as doing something for another person. Agnieszka admits: “I was glad I could do something good.” Missionary volunteering was seen by the participants as an alternative path. Zofia says: “I had this feeling that I was suffocating in Poland, that I’d become too caught up in consumerism. I wanted to do something that would really have value. I felt the need to live life to the fullest, rather than just to work and go shopping. I needed a place where I could pursue spiritual and existential values.” Marysia adds, “Generally speaking, I was looking for something more spiritual. I wanted to change something in my life. I was starting to feel that something was missing in my super-organised life.”

### Sharing one’s faith and serving others

For the respondents, missionary volunteering was a way of putting their faith into practice and serving others. Gabriela says: “The motivation should be simple: God and other people, because I am supposed to see Him in other people.” Zofia adds: “For me, what mattered was doing something for other people wherever I was needed.” Helping others was seen not only as a moral duty but also as a testimony of faith. Aneta emphasises: “We did simple things – e.g., at the orphanage – but that in itself was a testimony? You are with others all the time; it is about being there and being there for others.”

### Trust, openness, and a readiness for missionary experiences

Another defining feature was an attitude of complete trust and openness towards what the mission would bring. One of the participants put it this way: "God does not call the gifted, but gifts the called." The participants emphasised that they had not planned the trip in detail. Zofia said: "I didn't have any specific expectations, thinking, 'It would be great if this, that, and the other happened.' I simply knew that I was going where God wanted me to go." Instead, they placed their lives in God's hands and entrusted to Him whatever was to come. Aneta adds: "I trust that whatever comes, it will be God's will for me." The participants reduced their missionary commitment to a simple message: "to love and to serve." As Aneta put it: "When I went on missions, I used just two words: to love and to serve. To love another person... simply a person."

### Altruistic Values and the Need to Help Others

Many of them emphasised that the desire to be there for others was just as important as religious motivations. The participants' accounts indicate that altruism was a key motivating factor in their decision to go. The volunteers stressed the need to offer help and to share themselves and their skills. The desire to bring about real change in the lives of the people they worked with proved to be important. The idea of sacrifice and selflessness, which gave meaning to the mission they had undertaken, featured in many accounts. Hence, three thematic categories were identified within the framework of altruistic values and the need to help others.

#### The desire to help and to share oneself

The volunteers often cited their motivation as stemming from a need to provide concrete, tangible help to others. Anna says: "I wanted to do something real for another person. Something genuinely helpful that would make a difference to their life. I wasn't interested in business-related, imaginary problems." Agnieszka emphasises: "For me, the number one reason, the most important one, and why I wanted to go, was simply to do something for another person. I became fascinated by the missions, and I believe this is my space, where I find fulfilment in this volunteering. I recognised this as my calling." The participants also pointed to the need to share themselves. Zofia says: "The chance to give something of myself, to others." Anna adds: "My main motivation was to give something of myself."

Weronika notes: "It wasn't about developing skills or prestige, but about actually giving something to others."

### Serving others as an expression of faith and selfless commitment

The volunteers emphasised that their altruistic motivations were closely linked to a sense of service and the spiritual dimension of missionary work. They viewed working for others as a form of helping others through the fulfilment of a personal and religious vocation, which at the same time fostered their own spiritual development. Gabriela says, "This is a big part of my life. I see volunteering as doing something for another person. Through this work, I have discovered my place in the Church. For me, a mission is not just a trip to Africa, but living it out every day." Aneta expressed a similar view, emphasising both the dimension of service and the expression of a personal relationship with God: "I wanted to serve others there, but I also wanted to show my love for God through it. I felt that He was calling me to this and that I had accepted the invitation to the mission. I undertook this out of love for Him as well." Agnieszka emphasised that her trip was not driven by personal ambition, but was a response to a spiritual calling: "I had the feeling that I was going to these people together with God. Not for glory, but for them, to give of myself and show them, God, too."

### Daily presence and interpersonal relationships

The volunteers highlighted the importance of being there for others on a daily basis, building relationships and "being there for others", regardless of formal duties. Gabriela emphasised that the missions had given her the space to connect more deeply with others: "It's a calmer time and a way of life where you can truly be there for others. There are no targets to meet and nothing to rush about. You can stand with someone for half an hour, have a chat on the street, and simply notice another person." Similarly, Aneta noted that the essence of missionary work is not merely material or task-based assistance, but daily presence and relationship: "It's not just ordinary help – it's presence, it's relationship, it's everyday life with another person." Equally important was the aspect of direct action on behalf of another person, particularly in difficult situations. Anna pointed out that she found satisfaction in the opportunity to have a real impact on the lives of others: "I can do something directly for another person, which will be tangible help. In real problems, which are sometimes truly difficult." The volunteers also emphasised the universal value of closeness, which did not require a shared language. Anna

recalled that even in situations where there were communication barriers, simple gestures, such as a hug, were of immense importance: “Sometimes on missions, especially in Africa, when you don’t know the children’s tribal language, simply being with them and hugging them already means a great deal.”

## **Motivation for Travel and Personal Development**

Motivations of this kind were rarely the dominant factor. However, they often coexisted with religious and altruistic motivations. Participants emphasised the importance of the opportunity to discover new cultures. They also highlighted the chance to learn foreign languages. Developing interpersonal and professional skills was also a significant added value of the mission trip. Participants indicated that the travel-and-development enriched their experience. In many cases, it also strengthened their sense of purpose and satisfaction with the decision they had made. The main purpose of the trip remained service and the fulfilment of a spiritual calling. At the same time, the opportunity to explore the world provided an additional source of satisfaction. Acquiring new skills played a similar role. Motivations for travel and personal development fall into the following three distinct thematic categories.

### Language and social skills development

For some participants, acquiring or improving their language skills was important. Edyta says: “That’s also what motivated me – the chance to improve my command of another language, but also to learn a new one. It’s a life experience that will help me develop in my future career. It’s also about developing skills: professional skills, soft skills, openness, flexibility, and resilience in stressful situations.” The participants highlighted the development of interpersonal skills and qualities as useful in their future careers. Agnieszka emphasised: “It’s a life experience that will help you develop in your career later on. Professional skills, soft skills, openness, flexibility, and resilience in stressful situations.” This development complemented the altruistic and spiritual mission. It was not an end goal in itself, but rather something additional. It was the result of the work carried out on the missions.

### Motivations for travel and a fascination with culture

The volunteers often emphasised their desire to discover new places and cultures. However, this was not about tourism, but about everyday life within the local

community. A sense of curiosity about the world and a fascination with culture were clearly evident in the comments of the volunteers surveyed. These were key factors in their motivation to go on missions. Zofia said, "I was really fascinated by the idea of going to a new culture. I'll be able to experience that culture first-hand, be with those people, and experience that life." Although this aspect was not the main factor determining participation in the mission, it played a complementary role. It enriched the missionary experience and gave it a more personal dimension. Edyta emphasised: "It's a desire to get to know a new place. To experience life from the inside – how they spend their free time, what education is like, how they live and go about their daily lives." The volunteers also noted that the mission presented them with challenges related to the need to adapt to local realities. This required giving up their own habits and being open to different ways of thinking and acting. Weronika said: "It's not just about seeing, but about getting to know and understanding how the system works. I knew that this was an integral part of it, that I couldn't just turn up there and insist on my own beliefs."

### The quest for adventure and the fulfilment of dreams

For some volunteers, the mission trip was a unique "adventure of a lifetime" and the fulfilment of their travel dreams. Edyta: "It will be the adventure of a lifetime, a continuation of the adventure I started earlier. I'm returning to something familiar, to South America; it fills my heart." Weronika emphasised: "Yes, it was a desire to experience the adventure of a lifetime. Everyone feels that the trip is unusual and very transformative." In their accounts, there was a clear conviction that such a trip offers an opportunity to explore new places. The volunteers treated it as an extraordinary event. Martyna remarked, "In terms of getting to know this culture, I knew that this is an integral part of it. I can't go there and insist on doing things the way I've always done them. I'm less keen on quick trips now, because I'd like to stay in one place for longer and really get to know it."

### Personal, Spiritual, and Professional Benefits of Volunteering

For the participants, this experience was transformative. The missions were not limited to aid work. They provided a space for personal, spiritual, and professional development. Within the framework of the benefits obtained, the women distinguished three thematic categories.

### Personal development and self-fulfilment

The mission trip provided the participants with an opportunity to test themselves and their own limits. This process took place through personal development and self-fulfilment. Volunteering allowed them to face challenges. These required courage, determination, and mental resilience. For some of the participants, the mission was an attempt to answer the question of their own capabilities. It also concerned whether they could fulfil themselves in difficult and unfamiliar conditions. Agnieszka said, "I think I wanted to go to see if I was even capable of fulfilling myself in any way." At the same time, the missionary experience encouraged reflection on life priorities and one's value system. In the new reality, many of their previous beliefs and plans were being re-evaluated. Agnieszka notes: "My life goals were also re-evaluated. For example, I came to the conclusion that I no longer need to start a family. I'll be open to it, but it's not my main life goal."

Mission trips provided an opportunity to pause and critically reflect on the life choices they have made so far. Martyna also emphasised that volunteering had given her greater self-confidence. She also pointed to an increased openness towards others and the development of specific interpersonal skills. As she said, "Definitely lots of new relationships, lots of self-confidence and courage. Now I know how to talk to my patients, and I have more patience."

The mission trip also proved to be a space for intense self-discovery for the participants. It encouraged deep self-reflection and a confrontation with their own limitations. As Ola emphasised: "Through volunteering, I got to know myself and my limitations. I saw how I react in crises." This experience revealed both the difficult aspects of their personalities and their strengths. Previously, these might have remained hidden. Volunteering thus became a form of deep self-reflection. Zofia said: "I discovered truths about myself – difficult traits, but also good ones." Volunteering thus became a form of intense self-discovery. This kind of reflection is not provided by everyday, comfortable life. Weronika summed it up: "I can say that a person might not learn as much about themselves in a whole lifetime as they do on missions."

### Deepening of spirituality and sense of vocation

The participants noted that the time spent on missions had enabled them to experience inner peace and a closeness to God. This relationship gave them a sense of confidence and the strength to carry out their activities. Agnieszka said: "At that time, I had such a good relationship with God as I don't think I'd ever had before. I felt immense peace in my heart. I knew that what I was doing made sense."

Spirituality also developed through gradually learning to trust: moving from the need to control reality to adopting an attitude of openness and faith in God's guidance. Anna adds: "I learnt to trust that nothing happens without a reason and that God will guide it all. Even if sometimes one doesn't understand the meaning of a particular event, I have this sense that God is watching over it." Volunteering gave the participants a sense of self-worth and served as a form of fulfilling their calling, confirming the meaning of their presence and actions. Agnieszka says: "The second important aspect for me was testing myself and achieving a degree of self-fulfilment. I wanted to see if I could actually be valuable in the eyes of others. Just as I am valued in the eyes of the Lord."

### Acquiring professional and life skills

For the participants, taking part in long-term missionary volunteering provided an opportunity to acquire skills useful in their professional lives and everyday activities. The missions were a practical experience in which the participants could test their aptitudes and develop their interpersonal skills. Weronika emphasised: "The missions also developed my interpersonal and communication skills, which proved extremely useful in my subsequent professional life." Volunteering helped them discover talents and abilities they hadn't fully realised before. Martyna says: "I think I'm probably more hard-working than I used to be." For some of the respondents, the mission experience served as confirmation of their professional competence. Anna said: "I realised that I can work with children and that such work brings me joy."

### Reflections after Return

An analysis of the collected material indicates that the period following their return became a time of intense confrontation with reality for them. Martyna says: "After returning, I began to look at my life here differently. Things that once seemed important no longer held such significance. This is what remains, what is simplest and most authentic." The volunteers emphasised that the missions were a real confrontation with everyday difficulties. They often differed from earlier ideas and narratives that idealised missionary trips. Weronika noted, "It's not that it was bad, it's just that it wasn't as rosy as in the stories. You have to face everyday life, not just Facebook photos. Only then can you see if you really want to be part of it." Similarly, Zofia pointed out that the difficulties weren't limited to work. They also extended to her relationships with others after her return and the

emotions associated with them. As she said, "I thought it would be difficult, but that I'd manage somehow. But it turned out to be a different kind of difficulty – relationships, loneliness, a feeling of not being understood. You can't predict that."

Returning home encouraged them to reassess their daily lives and cultivate a greater sense of gratitude. The participants emphasised that the mission experience had taught them to enjoy simple things. They also pointed to a greater detachment from a consumerist lifestyle. As Aneta noted: "Over there, you were happy just to have water, to be able to drink, to see the children smiling. After returning, I maintained that approach for a long time. I realised that you don't need to have everything. A couple of things are really enough." Edyta expressed similar reflections, noting that the missionary perspective had allowed her to view everyday difficulties differently: "I've learnt not to complain. Even if things aren't going my way here, I know that I'm still incredibly privileged compared to what I saw."

Not all reflections following a return from a mission were positive. For many participants, coming home was associated with a sense of alienation and a lack of understanding from those around them. Zofia emphasised that her friends' reactions often failed to reflect the true nature of her experiences: "When I started telling my friends about it, they said: 'Wow! What an amazing adventure'. But I knew it wasn't an adventure, just hard work, often in solitude. I felt that nobody really understood that." Edyta described a similar experience. She pointed to the difficulties of finding her feet in her old environment after returning from the mission: "You change, you see the world differently, yet you return to people who live exactly as they did before. It's hard to fit in. I felt a bit of regret that there was no one to share it with." Ola added, "It was a total breakdown. For the first two months, I missed Uganda terribly. I missed the children. I missed everything: the weather, the smells. I wanted to go back there at every moment. At the same time, I felt a complete lack of understanding from other people."

Among the respondents, there were also reflections on the possibility of taking part in missions again. Some of the participants expressed a desire to return. They emphasised that the missionary experience remains a lasting part of their lives and spirituality. Aneta says: "If the opportunity arose, I would go again. This experience stays in my heart forever." At the same time, other interviewees stressed that careful discernment of the decision and taking into consideration the significance of one's current personal situation and spiritual readiness are necessary. Zofia adds: "I don't know whether I would decide to do it now. Maybe someday, but I need to be sure it's the right time."

The volunteers emphasised that the decision to go abroad should not be taken lightly, but requires careful consideration and a firm grounding in spiritual values. Agnieszka said: "First and foremost, this is not just some casual decision on our part, and it should not be treated as a wild adventure. People shouldn't

be discouraged if they have this desire in their hearts. Everything can be achieved through hard work and the sense that God comes first.” Many reflections also included encouragement to be courageous both in making the decision and in overcoming fears associated with going abroad. Anna says, “It depends on whether they are religious or not, but the first thought is that they should trust in God and pray through this decision. They shouldn’t worry that they lack sufficient skills or experience, because that’s not what matters most. Everyone has something to offer.”

Alongside these encouragements, some women also voiced critical comments, highlighting the need for proper preparation and a realistic approach to the mission. Martyna adds: “I don’t see the point in short trips. I believe that if someone is going for a month, two, or three, there needs to be a specific project. Not just turning up and figuring things out once they’re there.” Similarly, Marysia emphasised the need for a responsible approach and careful preparation for the trip: “I’m happy that the volunteering programme now also looks after the volunteers. There is a psychologist who carries out thorough assessments before anyone leaves. It is worth remembering that not every missionary needs a volunteer alongside them, so you need to match the destination and your tasks well.”

## Discussion

This study aimed to answer the question of what motivates female volunteers to undertake long-term missionary volunteering. The results obtained show that the decision to undertake long-term missionary volunteering is a complex and multi-dimensional process. No single dominant motive emerges from the volunteers’ statements. On the contrary, their commitment stemmed from the coexistence of several factors: religious-spiritual, altruistic, and developmental. Travel-related motives also appeared as a supplementary dimension.

This picture fits well with multi-factor models of volunteer motivation. According to many researchers, these models take into account the dynamic and changeable nature of motivation (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Reykowski, 1998). The strongest dimension of missionary motivation in the volunteers’ narratives was spirituality and a sense of vocation. These were understood both as a response to an inner ‘call’ and as the practical fulfilment of Christian responsibility towards others. The participants spoke of discerning their decision through prayer, spiritual direction, and community practices. They also emphasised the experience of meaning and inner peace in their decision to go. Motivation stemming from an inner conviction – consistent with one’s own values and identity – proved to be the most enduring and resilient in the face of adversity. This type of motivation,

described as autonomous, best captures the nature of the decisions made by the volunteers surveyed.

The second prominent theme was altruistic motivations, namely the need for real, everyday action 'for' people, building relationships and being 'with' them. Importantly, this altruism was practical in nature. It manifested itself in 'small acts' and a long-term presence, rather than in one-off 'heroic' deeds.

Developmental motivations (skills, language, flexibility, stepping out of one's comfort zone) and cognitive-travel motivations emerged as secondary factors. They enhanced the experience but did not play a dominant role. The participants distanced themselves from the phenomenon of so-called 'voluntourism', emphasising the primacy of service over adventure. This phenomenon, described in the literature as a form of aid tourism (Simpson, 2004), contrasts with the attitudes of the volunteers studied. For them, spiritual and altruistic motivations were paramount.

Reflections on returning from the mission proved to be a strong yet relatively under-discussed theme in the literature. The participants' narratives indicated a more realistic assessment of their experience, a deepening of their spiritual life, as well as difficulties in adapting and a sense of being misunderstood in their environment upon their return. These phenomena correspond to the classic concepts of culture shock and readjustment (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) and the theory of transition and reintegration (Bridges, 2004). According to Bridges, every change comprises three phases: ending, transition, and new beginning.

The first stage: ending (ending, losing, letting go) – involves the necessity of saying goodbye to one's previous role, environment, and way of life (Bridges, 2004). The participants described it as a moment of emotional separation from the mission location, colleagues, and the daily rhythm of life. It often evoked regret and a sense of emptiness.

The next phase: the transition zone (neutral zone) – is a period of uncertainty and self-redefinition. Old patterns cease to function, and new ones have not yet taken shape. At this time, the volunteers experienced disorientation and difficulty finding their bearings upon their return. They expressed this in reflections on a sense of not being understood and a longing for 'missionary life'.

The final stage: new beginning – signifies the gradual integration of experiences. The participants began to perceive the mission as an experience permanently embedded in their life story and identity. This influenced their future life choices and relationships with others.

This process clearly illustrates that returning from the mission is not the end in itself. It is the next stage of the journey – a moment of spiritual and identity transformation. During this stage, the volunteers learn to integrate their missionary experience with everyday life back home. This highlights the importance of

the return phase as an integral part of the entire missionary experience, requiring special attention in the process of preparing and supporting the volunteers. It should not be overlooked; it is worthwhile to provide post-return support for the participants.

In summary, the research findings present missionary volunteering as a transformative life experience. It combines various dimensions of motivation. It encompasses religious and spiritual motivations and a sense of vocation, which form its central aspect. Relational altruism is also important, manifesting itself in daily presence and service to others, as well as the need for personal development and new travel experiences. Involvement in missionary work led the participants to reflect on the meaning of life, faith, and their own place in the world, serving as a significant point of reference in their future lives.

The example of the volunteers studied testifies to their genuine commitment. It may inspire people who, in a world dominated by consumerism, are seeking a deeper meaning and actions based on values rather than the pursuit of profit or prestige. Missionary volunteering differs from secular forms of social activity due to its strongly emphasised spiritual dimension and the high degree of integration of spiritual, altruistic, and developmental motives, which confirms its unique, formative nature (Hustinx, 2010).

## Reference to the Literature

The analysis of the narratives indicates that religious-spiritual and altruistic motivations co-occur and reinforce one another. The participants emphasised that their decision was both a response to a spiritual calling and an expression of the need to serve others. In this way, religious and altruistic motivations formed a coherent whole, combining spiritual meaning with action for the benefit of others. This finding is consistent with Polish research on religious volunteering (Mariański, 2010; Olczyk, 2018) and with theories emphasising that actions consistent with one's own values are more enduring and resilient to burnout (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

Being with people and the value of small, everyday activities correspond well with the literature on altruism and helping. Sustained engagement fosters the development of compassion and a sense of agency (Batson, 2011). Compared to secular volunteering, missionary volunteering more often emphasises the community dimension and the continuity of presence, which may increase the chances of qualitative change both among volunteers and in local communities (Hustinx, 2010; Stukas et al., 2014).

The study participants emphasised the developmental value of the mission (e.g., acquiring language skills, flexibility, broadening horizons). At the same time, they

clearly distanced themselves from 'adventure travel'. Critical literature on so-called 'voluntourism' highlights the risk of exploiting local communities and treating the volunteering experience as a consumer product (Simpson, 2004). In the case of missionary volunteering, service clearly dominates. There is also a degree of caution regarding short trips without a specific purpose, which means that it can be regarded as qualitatively different from travel-aid practices.

Reflections following their return featured prominently in the volunteers' accounts. These included a more realistic assessment of their experiences, a deepening of spirituality, as well as difficulties with adaptation and a sense of being misunderstood by those around them. These phenomena correspond to the classic concept of return culture shock (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) and transition theory (Bridges, 2004). These findings indicate that the return and reintegration phase is a key element of the entire missionary experience for the volunteers.

In their statements, participants frequently returned to the themes of the meaning of life, peace, and alignment with their calling. This reinforces the interpretation of the results within the paradigm of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Missionary volunteering can be seen here as an experience conducive to the development of autonomy (alignment of actions with values), competence (increased sense of agency), and bonds (relationships and community). From a logotherapeutic perspective (Frankl, 2010), it may constitute a response to the fundamental need for meaning in life, particularly during moments of biographical turning points and re-evaluations.

## Limitations of the Study

Although the study provided an in-depth understanding of the experiences and the motivations of missionary volunteers, it has certain limitations. First and foremost, it was qualitative in nature and involved a relatively small sample size (10 people).

The results obtained should be treated as an illustration of specific phenomena and mechanisms, rather than as a basis for generalisations about the entire population of missionary volunteers.

An additional limitation is the homogeneity of the sample. All participants in the study were women, which does not allow for a comparison of experiences and motivations between the sexes. Possible differences arising from differing social roles, cultural expectations, or ways of experiencing spirituality, therefore, remain outside the scope of this analysis.

The narrative interview method used made it possible to present personal experiences fairly accurately, but this also had its limitations. The accounts are

based on subjective memories, which may be selective, incomplete, or distorted by subsequent experiences. The retrospective nature of the narrative makes it difficult to capture the 'original' picture of the emotions and experiences at the time of the missionary departure. Many statements may have been overshadowed by subsequent reflections and a more mature perspective.

The study also lacked the voices of those who, due to difficult missionary experiences, chose not to participate in the interviews. Their perspective could have significantly broadened the analysis, revealing additional factors influencing the decision-making process and potential difficulties in adaptation. Those experiencing serious difficulties on missions, unable to cope emotionally in those conditions, could have provided valuable insights regarding both the stay itself and the pre-departure phase. Another limitation is the absence of the perspective of mission organisers and the local communities to which the volunteers travel. As a result, the findings reflect the volunteers' own perceptions and interpretations of their experiences.

It is also worth noting the specific characteristics of the study group. Most of the participants had a university education and came from a Catholic cultural background. This may have influenced the greater reflectiveness of their statements and the way they framed their experiences through the prism of religious and worldview categories. The results cannot, therefore, be directly applied to people representing other religious traditions or different social backgrounds.

The researcher's role in the process of data collection and interpretation is also significant. The thematic and ideological affinity may have facilitated a better understanding of the narratives and the building of relationships with the interviewees. At the same time, it may have influenced the interpretation of the material, for example, through the subconscious selection of themes or the evaluation of these themes.

In summary, the limitations identified do not undermine the value of the study, but rather define its context and scope of interpretation. They highlight the need for caution when generalising the results. They emphasise the need for further research involving broader, more diverse groups. It is also worth developing research that combines qualitative and quantitative methods and encompasses a multifaceted perspective: volunteers, organisers, and host communities.

## **Implications**

The study's findings point to the need for a comprehensive approach to the preparation of mission volunteers. Training should combine spiritual elements with psychoeducation (resilience, managing anxiety, emotional regulation),

intercultural training (intercultural competencies, addressing prejudices, non-verbal communication), and preparation for mission work (goals, tasks, scope of responsibility).

Post-return support is equally important, encompassing mentoring, support groups, and supervision, as well as activities that help translate missionary experiences into everyday life. Introducing such measures helps to reduce the risk of frustration associated with re-entry shock and supports the integration of experiences from the mission into post-return daily life.

From an organisational perspective, the choice of placement and the duration of the assignment are also of key importance. Criticism of short and unfocused forms of volunteering suggests that missionary volunteering should be based on clearly defined tasks and preparation. This approach distinguishes it from voluntourism practices and fosters greater responsibility.

Based on the participants' experiences, it is also worth emphasising the importance of relationships and everyday life. Organisations should support forms of work that focus on building bonds and companionship, rather than solely on carrying out technical tasks. It was precisely these relationships that were identified as the main source of meaning and agency.

The study conducted went beyond the traditional framework of the *Volunteer Functions Inventory*, highlighting the significance of the spiritual and vocational dimensions, which were not included in Clary and Snyder's model. On this basis, we can propose an original concept of an integrated model of missionary motivation, in which the religious-spiritual, altruistic, developmental and cognitive dimensions form a coherent whole. This model demonstrates that personal and prosocial motivations can coexist and reinforce one another, and that the sustainability of commitment depends on the alignment of actions with one's professed values.

## Directions for Future Research

The findings to date, whilst making a valuable contribution to understanding the specific nature of missionary volunteers' motivations, also point to the need for further research. In particular, it seems appropriate to conduct quantitative and mixed-methods studies, which would enable the scale of individual phenomena to be determined and the significance of various categories of missionary volunteers' motivations to be compared within a broader population. Analyses based on questionnaires and statistical methods would allow us to verify the frequency of religious, altruistic, or development-oriented motivations, as well as to examine their links with personality traits and religiosity.

Another important area of focus is intergroup comparison. A comparison of the motivational profiles of missionary and lay volunteers could highlight commonalities and differences, pointing to the specific nature of missionary motivation. It would also be important to analyse potential differences between women and men, as well as between volunteers from different religious and cultural backgrounds. Such research could contribute to a better understanding of the cultural and gender-related factors influencing decisions regarding missionary involvement.

Another aspect worth exploring is the perspective of local communities and mission organisers. Existing research has focused primarily on the experiences of volunteers, whereas the views of beneficiaries, mission stations, missionaries and host institutions could broaden the perspective on missionary volunteer work, with particular emphasis on spiritual and religious aspects. Including these voices would make it possible to verify how the presence of volunteers is perceived in a cultural context, what benefits it brings, but also what tensions or organisational challenges it may give rise to.

Longitudinal studies are also recommended, as they would allow us to track the long-term consequences of participation in missionary volunteering. Participation in missions may, in fact, influence volunteers' identity, career choices, spirituality, attitudes, and life decisions. Meanwhile, most research focuses on immediate experiences and rarely analyses the durability and evolution of effects over the long term.

The process of reintegration following a return from a mission appears to be a particularly interesting and necessary area for further analysis. The experiences of female volunteers indicate that this stage can be difficult and ambiguous, and that the forms of support available are limited. Future research should focus on an in-depth analysis of post-mission adaptation mechanisms and on evaluating the effectiveness of various forms of support, such as mentoring, supervision, spiritual guidance, and support groups.

## **Conclusion**

Missionary volunteering emerges as a distinctive form of activity in which the intertwining of religious, altruistic, and personal development values gives the volunteers' actions a unique character. The research conducted confirmed that the motivations of those deciding to participate in missionary volunteering are varied and deeply interconnected, but religious, spiritual, and altruistic considerations occupy a central place, often expressed as a strong sense of calling and responding to a perceived vocation. It is these that form the foundation of the decision to undertake missionary service, giving it meaning, direction, and sustainability, as well as

providing a framework that helps volunteers persevere despite the difficulties of everyday work in demanding conditions. Developmental and travel-related factors play a supplementary role, enhancing the experience and sense of satisfaction, but they rarely constitute the main reason for involvement; rather, they complement the core motivations by enabling the acquisition of new linguistic, interpersonal and intercultural competences and broadening personal horizons. These motivations do not function independently, but remain closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing, creating a coherent motivational structure that distinguishes missionary volunteering from secular forms of engagement.

The research findings indicate that women's decision to undertake missionary volunteering is an expression of a well-considered attitude, rooted in spiritual values, a need to serve, and a search for meaning in acting for the benefit of others. At the same time, altruistic motivations are strongly connected with the need to build relationships and engage in meaningful interactions, which turn community life into a key source of both meaning and personal agency. Participation in missions leads to a multidimensional transformation, including a re-evaluation of priorities, a strengthening of faith, and a deepening of relationships with oneself, with other people, and with God. It is a process that influences both personal and spiritual life, as well as future career choices and the way one perceives one's own role in society, often encouraging reflection on life plans and long-term directions.

An important yet often challenging stage of this experience is the return and reintegration phase, which emerges as a significant and integral part of missionary volunteering. This phase may involve difficulties in readjusting to everyday life, a sense of being misunderstood by others, and challenges in translating the mission experience into the previous social context. At the same time, it plays a crucial role in the long-term integration of the experience into one's life story, allowing the transformation initiated during the mission to take on a more permanent and meaningful character.

A comparison of the findings with the relevant literature suggests that the results of the present study largely correspond with some earlier research (Bomber, 2017; Mich, 2016; Nalichaeva et al., 2021). At the same time, the present study highlights specific elements of missionary volunteering in the Polish context, particularly the importance of the process of discerning one's vocation, which proves to be a key aspect of preparation for departure. This points to the need for further analysis, covering both the spiritual and practical dimensions, as well as the necessity of providing systematic support for volunteers not only during the preparation phase, but also throughout the mission and upon their return, especially in the context of reintegration challenges.

Missionary volunteering can be seen as a space where personal searches for meaning intersect with relational needs, and the individual's experience fits into

a broader religious, social, and cultural context. It constitutes not only an act of helping others but also a process of personal growth and self-discovery embedded in everyday practices and relationships. In the daily life of the mission, far from media attention, a quiet yet lasting transformation takes place for both those who help and those to whom help is extended. Missionary volunteering demonstrates that in a world full of haste and individualism, there is still room for selflessness, faith, and the courage to be there for others.

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