

Welcoming the Stranger

Marci Madary from La Crosse, Wisconsin

When I think of the Christmas story, I often reflect on Mary and Joseph being forced to travel to an unfamiliar city, vulnerable to the unknown. As their journey on a donkey comes to a close, they enter Bethlehem late at night, Mary in a precarious state and Joseph unsure of his ability to provide for her. They are turned away by all with their only chance for a shelter, a hint of a barn outside of town. Although the circumstances are grim, they create a place of warmth and goodness to bring a baby into the world that he will change.

And while the townspeople close their doors, the young family is welcomed in unexpected ways. The animals that live in the barn move over and make room. They welcome the strangers. The shepherds, smelly from extended time in the outdoors and living with animals, come and welcome the fragile infant. The stars in the night sky shine their brightest, welcoming the birth.

Savoring the elements of this sacred story of welcoming, my mind drifts back to warmer months, to the August 2008 Affiliation Retreat at Prairiewoods Spirituality Center. I went with the expectation of learning about Francis and his visit to the sultan. I anticipated discovering new ways to be a more peaceful person, to be transformed into a welcoming presence for those who are different than me. Sister Marla Lang and Liz Deligio certainly opened up the story of Francis for the ten of us attending the retreat. They helped us examine our habits in order to break down stereotypes and be more mindfully inclusive of others. But there was something else, something more, which captures my attention many months later.

The last evening of the retreat, four Muslim women came to talk with us and answer our curiosities and confusions about their Islam faith. They patiently listened and responded in gentle tones. Gracefully they smiled and shared their love of God with us. After they took their leave, we retreatants contemplated our experience of listening to the women. Then we got in our cars and visited the Mosque where the women worship. I was definitely a stranger in a strange land, lacking the basic knowledge of where to put my shoes and in what direction people faced during prayer. Despite my clumsiness, the Muslim members welcomed me. They spoke with our group, gave us a tour, invited us to be present during their prayer, and shared their food.

I remember feeling mixed up. Wasn't I supposed to be the calm, welcoming presence? Wasn't someone else, someone less fortunate than me, supposed to be the stranger? But since God continually invites us to warm the uncomfortable places within ourselves, I really shouldn't have been surprised by the turn of play. The best way for me to learn how to welcome the stranger was to be welcomed as the stranger. I am grateful to Sister Marla and Liz for creating this unique opportunity; I am thankful for my fellow retreatants who also braved the unknown; but most of all I stand in gratitude to the Muslim women who showed me the face of God.

This Christmas season I encourage us all to allow ourselves to not only be the strong helping hand, but the weak and lost. To fully enter into life's mysteries, we must both give and receive, love and be loved. In looking at the openness of Jesus' life, the meagerness of his birth, the humility of his death, and the challenge of his resurrection, we know it is in our own vulnerability in which our greatest strength lies.

Suzanne and I hope everyone enjoys a Merry Christmas and experiences an abundance of blessings this New Year!



Looking toward the 2009 General Assembly

During this winter's Area Days, sisters and affiliates will continue to enflame our hearts for mission as we move into our next stage of preparation for the General Assembly in June 2009.

As noted in the November letter and Area Day registration form sent out to sisters and affiliates, affiliates are invited to join the sisters for Friday evening and Saturday morning. Centrality of Mission will be the focus on Friday evening after supper. Saturday morning will center on Perpetual Adoration and Affiliation. There will be special affiliate sessions on Saturday afternoon at Spokane on February 21, at St. Rose on February 28, and at Prairiewoods on March 14. Affiliates may attend the other scheduled Area Days, but please be aware that only the three locations listed above will contain an additional session for affiliates only.

In explanation, Area Days serve as preparation for the General Assembly. The work of the General Assembly is to "evaluate the fidelity of the congregation to its charism and mission, legislate on all important matters pertaining to the entire congregation, elect officers, determine government structures and make necessary changes in the Constitution and Book of Directives" (Article #52 Unity in Diversity). The congregational Direction Statement also is included in the above directive.

Technically, affiliates are not invited to the General Assembly at all. Affiliates are invited to some of the discussions either immediately before or after the General Assembly, particularly those that pertain to mission and charism but never governance or finance. Since the congregational Mission Statement and Direction Statements are the heart of both sisters and affiliates, the wisdom and experience of affiliates is important to the ongoing creation and implementation of our Franciscan charism.

What was your experience of a General Assembly?

Madalene Buelow from La Crosse, Wisconsin

I've always been the type of person that jumps into a thought, a process or an organization with two feet. Becoming an affiliate and in turn living a Franciscan lifestyle means that I take it seriously. When the opportunity arises to attend Affiliate Gatherings, Area Days, General Assembly or Chapter of Chats—I'm there.

My first General Assembly in 2005 was a special gift. It was an opportunity to see first hand how the congregation conducts itself through prayer, ritual, discussion and consensus. I loved the opportunity to "table talk" with my companions, both sisters and affiliates and just hear how deeply we all feel about Franciscanism.

Because of my participation I felt called to step up one



more time and put my name forward to serve on a general assembly committee. The spirit moved and I became a part of the General Assembly Committee for Affiliation. The committee has been an educational and inspirational process for me. I'm happy to report that the committee has done what was theirs to do.

See you at the 2009 Assembly!

Ann Fox from Appleton, Wisconsin

I find it no small happenstance that this last issue of *Connections* has as one focus, the FSPA Assembly. When I was asked to write "Why do I choose to attend and what do I get out of it" I already had my answer—connections—which enables us as a community to dream and vision as well as begin concrete action to realize the vision.



Several assemblies ago when affiliates were invited to attend the assembly, the summary given by affiliates was the words from a classic song: "getting to know you, getting to know all about you . . ."

What better place to review what has been and then building on that, envisioning what could be? What better place to acknowledge our history and be challenged and stimulated in the present to what may evolve in the future? What better way for the Spirit to influence an entire body of people in contrast to single individuals? And what better way to renew what it means to be an FSPA affiliate? Yes to connections and all that that connotes!

Ted Laitinen from Sacramento, California

I attend a General Assembly just to be included and to feel connected. The FSPA community has a charism which is infectious to the outside world and for those who are open. It draws us to be in relationship. At the basis of this attraction is a way of life known as Franciscan spirituality which of itself, is unique and contrasts with the ways of the world.



As an affiliate living in California—a long way from La Crosse, I long to have the comfort and availability to communicate with others whose lifestyle and spirituality I share. The gathering of the community for a general assembly provides just such an opportunity. It is a chance to talk with and see sisters and affiliates that have not been seen for a long time. It is also refreshing and exciting, because it grounds me in the decision I made to be affiliated with this community. Attending, gives an affiliate the opportunity to participate in the organization. I have always felt that my opinion was valued and I was a part of the process.

From Connections to Presence

As I look back at the first issue of *Connections*, printed in October 1988, a wave of nostalgia washes over me. The typewriter print announces good news and glad tidings. The sense of enthusiasm is tangible as I read the opening lines, "This is the first issue of CONNECTIONS. The title signifies our interconnectedness as volunteers and affiliates and our joint rooting the FSPA tradition. It connotes the dynamic quality of Franciscanism—a committed individual and corporate response to the gospel call for renewal of selves and the world God created and loves."

With the leadership of Sister Fran Sulzer, affiliation director at that time, affiliates and sisters certainly continued to connect with one another and grow together. We have been busy weaving the pattern of relationships since then, and *Connections* has been a significant vehicle to pull us together. However, all things change.

An FSPA communication audit conducted in 2008 indicated that sisters and affiliates desired more efficiency and less paper with written publications from FSPA. Following these recommendations the current newsletters, *Connections*, *Insight* and *Incorporation News* will be combined into one. This publication, *Presence*, will be printed six times a year with sisters, affiliates and prayer partners as its intended audience.

According to its mission, *Presence* celebrates FSPA members,

affiliates and prayer partners through inspiring content. The publication speaks directly to members, affiliates and prayer partners by writing about ministries, events, prayer and adoration, environmental concerns, justice and peace advocacy and more. This combined newsletter will not only reduce production costs, mailing costs and paper consumption, but be a symbol of the unity and mutuality sisters, affiliates and prayer partners experience in their interactions with one another.



Masthead design for the new FSPA publication, Presence

Presence will continue most of the popular features from *Insight* and *Connections*. Readers will still enjoy the article from the Ecospirituality Committee and practical "green" tips from Mary Ellen Dunford's column, *Living Simply, Living Franciscan*. And as always, timely coverage of events will continue to be reported along with feature articles on ministries. In addition, a regular feature from the incorporation team will highlight trends in religious life.

Other regular columns that have been a part of *Connections* and *Insight*, like *Pray for . . .* and *Kudos* will be transferred to the weekly email (*Coffee Talk*).

But before we say our last goodbye to *Connections*, I would like to acknowledge past affiliation directors who, through their passion and skill have nurtured and shaped not only *Connections* but the affiliation relationship into what it is today. These amazing women are Sisters Fran Sulzer, Lisa Zmuda, Carita Carey, Suzanne Rubenbauer and Karen Neuser. With a spirit of gratitude, we will carry on the sacred tradition of reflecting the spirit and values of FSPA in *Presence*.

Congratulations!

- Beth Prairie on the birth of her daughter, Sophia Elizabeth
- Mae Flores on her renewal as a prayer affiliate.
- Gwen Puent on her renewal as a covenant affiliate.

Pray for...

- ☞ Marie Barfknecht
- ☞ Anna Marie Cackoski
- ☞ Chet Corey on the death of his mother
- ☞ Agnes Flottmeier, RIP
- ☞ Son of Joan Gerhards
- ☞ Husband of Joyce Heil
- ☞ Sandra Hoerer on the death of her mother
- ☞ Donna Mayer
- ☞ Katie Richel
- ☞ Wilma Spaeth
- ☞ Mary Snider
- ☞ Sandy Worthing on the death of her husband
- ☞ All of the family members of affiliates who are serving in the military in the Middle East

2009 Dates to Save

- February 6-7** - Area Day at Villa St. Joseph, La Crosse, WI
- February 13-14** - Area Day at St. Rose, La Crosse, WI
- February 20-21** - Area Day at Clare Center, Spokane, WA
- February 20-21** - Area Day at St. John's Parish, Menasha, WI
- February 27-28** - Area Day at St. Rose, La Crosse, WI
- March 13-14** - Area Day at Prairiewoods, Hiawatha, IA
- March 27-28** - Area Day at WomanWell, St. Paul, MN
- June 9-13** - General Assembly, La Crosse, WI
- June 21-25** - Affiliation Live-In, La Crosse, WI
- June 23** - Sister and Affiliate Picnic, La Crosse, WI
- July 30-August 1** - Affiliation Retreat at Christine Center, Willard, WI
- August 1** - Peace Day, La Crosse, WI
- October 16-17** - Sister and Affiliate Fall Gathering, La Crosse, WI

Caring Hearts – Helping Hands

Neighbor-to-Neighbor: Share a Sheep

Affiliates and sisters, an affiliate is putting an announcement in her parish bulletin about Share a Sheep. She is encouraging us to do the same at our local grassroots level. So far, \$1,500 has been donated. We now have a flock! Feel free to edit the below bulletin announcement.

During a pilgrimage sponsored by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, the participants visited San Isidro De Gamboa, a small village in Mexico. Since most of the men can no longer find work in or near the village, the women and children of San Isidro are keeping their village together through community networking and just plain hard physical labor. One way San Isidro is becoming financially sound is by raising sheep.

FSPA is sponsoring the Share a Sheep Project. These tax deductible donations will go directly to the village of San Isidro. The funding received will help six families by providing each family with sheep, along with start-up funds for metal roofs, corral building material and animal food.

Donation can be made in honor of a person or family. A gift card will be sent by the FSPA Development Office to you or to your gifted. In addition, donors will receive a tax deduction letter from FSPA. Donations can be sent to: GATE Charitable Giving; I/c FSPA; 912 Market Street; La Crosse, WI 54601. Great for Christmas, birthdays, anniversaries, retirement! Remember to write "Share a Sheep" on the memo line.

Ministry Opportunities at the Villa St. Joseph

1. Visiting and praying with the sisters – Visits would be one-to-one, for approximately 20-30 minutes, about once a month. There are about 15 sisters who would welcome visitors and people to pray with and for them.

2. Leading a group in faith sharing – No experience needed! Help lead small group faith sharing with the sisters, following the format for FAITH ALIVE. (Orientation and support will be provided.)

3. Leading book discussions – The Shack, Cardinal Bernadine and other books to be decided.

5. Reading to sisters – Some sisters who can no longer see would appreciate it if someone could read to them.

Experience required: None! If any of the above opportunities interest you, please contact Sr. Sharon Rohde at 608-788-5100.

Zoo Siab Txais Tos Tsoom Kɔw Tij Thiab Nkauj Muam Txhua Tus

Welcome Brothers and Sisters

Our Hmong brothers and sisters settled in the Coulee Region over 30 years ago after fleeing from their homeland of Laos. Yet many still struggle to find their place in our culture and to form meaningful relationships with local residents.

The Franciscan Spirituality Center would like to offer an opportunity for a cross-cultural friendship network between members of the Hmong community and friends of the center.

This is your invitation to consider forming a Franciscan friend-

Living Simply, Living Franciscan

Mary Ellen Dunford from Hiawatha, Iowa

For the past year this column has focused on the use of plastics in our everyday life. As our affiliation plastic bag campaign closes, I'd like to share with you the 5 R's that relate to the use of plastic bags at Prairiewoods.

1. Refuse: Say "no thanks" to plastic shopping bags at the checkout.
2. Reduce: Only use plastic bags for food items when it is necessary for good hygiene.
3. Reuse: Use alternative bags to carry your shopping items.
4. Recycle: Return any unwanted plastic bags to the store for recycling.
5. Rethink: Consider how your actions impact the environment.

With so much information about plastics and the hazards of using them, I found this mnemonic in a Co-Op America magazine helpful for remembering which plastics leach toxic chemicals and which are safer to use. So when purchasing food items, toys or any other products remember this.

One, two: Use, renew

Four, five: Keep you alive

Six, seven, three: Not for thee or me

Blessings to you all.

2008 Franciscan Living Challenge:

By the end of 2008, affiliates and sisters will no longer use plastic shopping bags.

Thank You

Thank you to the many individuals who contributed toward the Affiliation Resource Fund. The current balance is now \$2,520. If you need a scholarship, contact the Affiliation Office for an application.

ship with a Hmong brother or sister eager for connection and companionship.

To get started, you would attend a one hour orientation session in mid-February on Hmong culture presented by Nhia Vang, Minority Affairs Specialist, at Western Technical College. Once paired with a Hmong companion, you would be asked to spend at minimum two hours per month sharing activities and mutual interests.

If interested in this special invitation, contact Linda Kerrigan or Barb Kruse at FSC, 608-791-5295.