

Extension Cords Companion Community: presence at a distance

fspa.org/content/s/extension-cords-companion-community-presence-at-a-distance

June 6, 2020

By Darleen Pryds, affiliate



If we were looking for just one word to describe the FSPA community, it would likely be “presence.” We share a love and devotion of the Eucharist and adoration. Through these spiritual practices, we acknowledge Christ’s presence and experience the presence of each other.

As an affiliate, I've experienced something special about our shared spirituality in the last several years: it's possible to be present to others who share this spirituality even at a distance.

Long before the pandemic was compelling sisters, companion communities and affiliates to meet virtually on a regular basis, a group of lay affiliates was already teleconferencing regularly, forging a path of connections, faith and friendship — all with perseverance — while trying out various remote communication platforms. The FSPA Virtual Companion Community began several years ago to help connect affiliates who live far away from each other. Mary Ellen Dunford was a founding member of the group. When asked if she were naturally tech-savvy, Mary Ellen responded, “No! I am willing to learn and try new technology, but it stresses me out!” It is now about four years later and, despite that stress, she remains one of the rotating facilitators of the meetings.

There's no denying that sometimes technology has caused potentially stressful situations in our gatherings. I remember hearing, during the first few months I attended, phrases that included “Can you hear me? Can you hear me now?” “Who's singing?” “I wonder whose voice that is.” “That reverb is loud! Is someone's cell phone near the computer? Just put it aside!” “Whoops, did we lose someone? Whose line just dropped?” “I wonder if Darrin can help with this?” For a while, it seemed that each month we experienced various technological challenges, but we worked through them by experimenting with different teleconferencing programs until we found one that worked for us. We learned to laugh at our foibles. Yes, solving the tech problems helped, but the connection we developed ran deeper.

In time, these connections were strong enough that FSPA Virtual Companion Community didn't quite suffice as our group name. One member, Lavina Taylor, who has been an affiliate since 2018, considered other names including “The Gabriela's” after the angel Gabriel, or “Esperanza” for hope (likely for the hope we all cultivated each month that the tech connection would work!). Lavina slept on it, and in a dream she came upon the name that has stuck — “The Extension Cords!”

The name has stayed with us largely due to the bonds we have built that extend across great distances and include different personalities, life experiences and viewpoints. We're also connected through a shared commitment: to show up and “plug in.”

We are a group that fluctuates in numbers and members, but for about a year now, we have held steady at about 10 to 12 members. We log in through a computer or call in by telephone once a month for meetings that last an hour. We live in three different time zones and seven states, and the group consists of mostly women with one brave man in our midst. Our average age is about 65. None of us ever expected that we'd be part of a virtual faith-sharing group or, that, meeting only virtually, we would cultivate bonds of friendship and faith.

Most of us Extension Cords have only encountered each other in person briefly at affiliation gatherings or during A Revolution of Goodness in 2018. The first time I saw another Extension Cord member was the moment I processed into Mary of the Angels Chapel to make my affiliate commitment. I remember walking with others I had just met and at the same time realizing, “Oh, there’s an old friend!” It was Mary Ellen, an affiliate of more than 20 years who considers the FSPA community her family. Even though I hadn't met her yet she was standing there, smiling warmly, my good friend.

Even without personal contact on a regular basis, we share our faith and our respective ministries of drumming, teaching, volunteering in food pantries, practicing intercessory prayer, knitting caps for people without homes, hospice caregiving, parish work, immigrant advocacy and care. In short, presence. These respective ministries come forward in our meetings when we discuss topics ranging from white privilege and racism to the environment and care for the earth; Christmas traditions; intentions for A Revolution of Goodness' provocative movements to what it means to be Franciscan, specifically as lay affiliates of FSPA.

But it’s clear that our virtual gatherings each month are more than having “a meeting.” When asked what she gets out of belonging to the Extension Cords, Lavina, who lives in Tucson, Arizona, said, “I get a sense of belonging to a group that is diversified yet has common values and aspirations. I feel accepted and safe to ‘be me’ and yet have the opportunity to grow and deepen my understanding of issues.”

Through the years, we have celebrated graduations, anniversaries, birthdays and even minor achievements like logging into a meeting successfully. We have also journeyed with each other through life’s challenges such as critical surgeries, family health emergencies and deaths. What does this journeying together mean to us? Affiliate Sharon Laitinen, who lives near Sacramento, California, shared, “When my husband was declining in health, we were unable to attend affiliate retreats and other events unless they were live-streamed or recorded. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I am again unable to travel. So, I am very grateful for my virtual affiliates who are present to each other through the mediums of Zoom, email and phone calls. I enjoy attending the monthly Zoom meetings because of the healing presence of each person and our shared Franciscan response to lived reality. I especially like the fact that we are giving and receiving energy from all the places that our group represents, including California, Arizona, Montana, Iowa, Wisconsin and Michigan. This group is such a blessing!”

For other members, Extension Cords allows for a path to stay connected. Affiliate Mary Flowers, who lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan, notes, “I no longer drive and do not regularly get to a parish. Both the computer and phone enable ongoing connections with others on the spiritual journey. It is meaningful to listen to folks express their personal and faith journeys.” Other members live in areas in which they feel isolated from like-minded people on the Franciscan spiritual path. Affiliate Sandra McKee, who lives in Montana,

confided, “I was feeling pretty discouraged and it was my connections with the FSPA friends that kept me connected to affiliation. Then I heard about the Extension Cords. I was so excited! I think I have been ‘meeting’ with the group for less than a year, but I have so enjoyed the feeling of connection. We (FSPA and affiliates) have a special charism of respect for nature, hospitality, ecospirituality, Franciscan values and sense of community, which resonates with my deepest beliefs. I feel at home with this group.”

It’s clear that Extension Cords members feel the meetings are more than monthly social gatherings. Affiliates Charlotte Willenborg and Tim Sullivan note that the group “is a way to keep learning and growing in our faith. We feel we have a responsibility to participate in affiliation, and this is how we can do it.”

These years of presence at a distance have prepared us for these challenging days of the pandemic. As affiliate Sue Lund says, “COVID-19 isolation has made being homebound even more difficult. I’ve had no human contact because Meals on Wheels leaves deliveries outside my apartment door now. Extension Cords met last night. I realized afterward that they had pulled me back to ‘God is with us’ and that the Franciscan charism can still be shared in the world. Perhaps the affiliate future will be virtual contact. The success of our group shows that it is possible.”

The success that Sue refers to is really based on our shared commitment to be present to each other. In that presence, we evolve and grow in faith both individually and as a community. Over the last six months or so, I’ve noticed a new tradition developing in our midst. By the end of our meetings, whatever we have shared or discussed, someone feels inspired to call to mind a song. Our Extension Cord play list includes “Joy to the World” by Three Dog Night, “Bless the Beasts and the Children” by the Carpenters, “Turn, Turn, Turn” by the Byrds and “For Good” by Kristin Chenoweth and Idina Menzel. So, I thought I’d end with a new addition from the Rolling Stones, especially in these days of shelter-in-place during COVID times.

If there is one thing we have learned over the years, by virtually meeting once a month, we get what we need.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/N7pZgQepXfA>

Extension Cords' Best Practices



1 Turn your microphone to mute when you're not speaking. This limits extraneous noise.

5 Having a designated facilitator keeps discussions on track and helps open the conversation to everyone.

2 Log on early so you're ready to go at the appointed start time. If you're running late, please join in! You're always welcome!



6 Set time limits for meetings so that participants know the commitment involved.



3 If there are technical glitches, breathe deeply and know that it's not the end of the world.

4 Understand that this is not a telephone call with just one person. Practice a pause before speaking for a second time during the sharing/discussion. Chances are that others want a chance to speak but haven't had a chance yet.

7 Designate a note keeper for each meeting who will share a summary of the conversation (including resources mentioned). This helps people remember the conversation, informs those who missed the meeting and allows participants to go deeper into study and reflection.

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A common thread: environmental justice, current ministries and a pandemic

fspa.org/content/s/a-common-thread-environmental-justice-current-ministries-and-a-pandemic

June 6, 2020

By **Beth Piggush**, integral ecology director



We are blessed in many ways and each day is a gift. The state of our lives during this pandemic is a visceral reminder of our need to connect with our faith with each other and with nature. A common thread is our sacred Mother Earth and the basic elements of land,

water, air and fire. We are discovering now more than ever that we need Mother Earth and that her gifts are crucial, just like those of our essential workers. The opportunity to eat wholesome food, drink clean water, breathe clean air and play outside is fundamental to keeping our bodies, minds and hearts healthy yet are not available to everyone in need and all who are working.

Several FSPA are ministering across the United States on the front lines of an integral ecology. As Sister Eileen McKenzie recently shared in Perspectives magazine, integral ecology is an essential element “rooted in the Franciscan understanding that all of creation is intimately related as brothers and sisters in Christ. As such, the suffering of humanity cannot be separated from the suffering of our environment, and vice versa.” As the suffering of our planet might be alleviated due to mandates to stay at home, we are seeing an even greater need within humanity to survive.

From Spokane in Washington and Chicago in Illinois to rural Iowa and a First Nation reservation in Arizona, people are more vulnerable because of the pandemic. FSPA is there to witness and to help. For example, Sister Joyce Blum, currently ministering in Western Iowa, has shared a story about the farm worker in the field and the impact on local meat processing plants. “We wash our hands. But who carries a bucket around with them out on the farms, in the vegetable fields? And, what about spaces between workers?” Clean water is essential, and we can make this an opportunity to ensure that everyone from the field to the city has access and pollution slows.

In urban centers like Spokane, access to food is essential and need is growing exponentially. Sister Kathy Roberg shares that Women and Children's Free Restaurant and Community Kitchen has gone from providing 2,000 meals a week pre-pandemic to 20,000 meals a week currently. Where does this food come from? How can we ensure that the land and all of the people who are part of the food production chain are safe and cared for? Access to food is essential and when local farms in Washington or Iowa cannot produce, the relationships within an integral ecology become more obvious through a lens of environmental justice.

An integral ecology crossroads of public health and planet health is also appearing on the Arizona reservation where Sister Donna Stevens serves. The pandemic has hit the community hard. Some people are suffering from addiction, and the social structure for basic self-care is deteriorating. Residents are experiencing malnutrition, leading to poor physical health. “Thus, many of our people set themselves up for acute and long-term illness, such as this pandemic,” says Sister Donna. On top of this, the impacts of climate change heighten the effects of heat and water access. As Pope Francis wrote, “everything is connected,” and tragically, this health crisis has much in common with the ecological crisis.

The emergence of this pandemic has shown devastating consequences of our treatment of nature and each other, and we need to do at least one thing differently going forward: let us take time to reflect, pray, plan and act with environmental justice for people and the planet. Each daily action we take can have an impact on the gifts of land, water, air and fire. Let us act out of respect for our common thread with sacred Mother Earth. We need to remember that the gifts of Mother Earth are essential to us, but that we are not essential to land, water, air and fire.



ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IS “THE FAIR TREATMENT AND MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT OF ALL PEOPLE REGARDLESS OF RACE, COLOR, NATIONAL ORIGIN, OR INCOME WITH RESPECT TO THE DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION, AND ENFORCEMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL LAWS, REGULATIONS, AND POLICIES.”

- U.S. HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES DEPARTMENT

[LEARN MORE](#)

The USCCB Environmental Justice Framework's four priority areas

1

environmental justice: defined as the strong link between social justice and environmental protection emphasizing the needs of the poor;

2

sustainable development: with an emphasis on social and economic development that not only protects the sustainability of natural resources but promotes a just distribution of resources today and for future generations;

3

worker protection: with an emphasis on not sacrificing workers' needs at the expense of environmental protection or vice versa; and

4

the "commons": defined as protecting vital global shared resources such as the oceans, land, water and fisheries.



L E A R N M O R E

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COVID-19: ‘will we ever know how many have succumbed to this virus?’

fspa.org/content/s/covid-19-will-we-ever-know-how-many-have-succumbed-to-this-virus

June 6, 2020

By Pat Ruda, justice and peace promoter



COVID-19 has certainly proven to shake up our world. This virus has spread globally to change the lives of all in its way. I think it is important to note that COVID-19 has had a strong impact globally, regionally and locally on our marginalized populations. The

COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to devastate vulnerable communities, especially refugees, migrants and women and children challenged by economic hardships and social disparities. Will we ever know how many have succumbed to this virus?

We are all impacted by COVID-19 but not to the same degree. There are compounding effects of systemic injustice and institutional racism. COVID-19 is hitting black, Latino and indigenous communities particularly hard. It appears that people of color may have more preexisting conditions like hypertension, diabetes and COPD, putting them more at risk during this pandemic. According to Politico magazine, African American communities in Chicago, Illinois, represent about two thirds of the city's COVID-19 deaths despite making up only one third of the population. We read daily about the large numbers of blacks and Latinos working at meat packing plants who tested positive for the virus. I believe these are prime examples of why we need to advance racial justice.

Blacks and Latinos represent 51% of New York City's population. Reports indicate that 62% percent of COVID-19 deaths in the city have occurred within these racial groups. Black residents of Louisiana make up only 25% of the population but 70% of COVID-19 deaths. It also appears that air pollution has a dramatic effect on this population in relation to asthma, heart and respiratory conditions and health outcomes.

In La Crosse, Wisconsin, reported COVID-19 infection cases are low and I have not seen anything referencing people of color. What we do know is that vulnerable populations — low-income folks — are being challenged by loss of work. In April, the Coulee Region Immigration Task Force applied for and received a grant to assist immigrants with basic needs. A second grant was awarded in May. A total of \$55,000 was granted to help this vulnerable population that may not be eligible for federal and state assistance. Fifty families were assisted at that time.

COVID-19 has certainly affected all of us — globally, regionally and locally — in everything we currently do. With some statistics indicating it could be 18 to 24 months before we return to what we knew to be normal, it appears that a new normal will be unveiled.

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Sisters take to the air to invite discernment with FSPA

fspa.org/content/s/sisters-take-to-the-air-to-invite-discernment-with-fspa

June 6, 2020

By Sister Amy Taylor, membership director



This was the fifth year that I have applied for permits and organized an informational booth for the FSPA Membership Office to share vocational discernment information during the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress, held annually at the Anaheim Convention Center in Anaheim, California. Religious Education Congress is in its 54th year

and has educated multiple generations serving in the Catholic Church throughout. This year, I invited Sister Mary Arnoldussen to accompany me and to share the mission and charism of FSPA with attendees.

On Feb. 19, we excitedly boarded our first flight of the day at La Crosse Regional Airport in Wisconsin, flew to Detroit, Michigan, and then to Los Angeles, California. Happy to be on the ground once again, we waited patiently for our shuttle to take us through the snarled traffic to Anaheim. After a restful night of sleep and a little caffeine with breakfast, we were off to the convention center to set up our FSPA booth.

This year there were 540 booths. Amidst skid steers, rolls of carpet, a sea of cardboard boxes and an array of union workers and vendors, we located our booth and went to work. We began hanging our banner filled with pictures that depict, from our founders to community members of today, life as an FSPA. Each photo conveys a quick glimpse into our lives, offers a visual gateway to religious life and invites the attention of the throngs of attendees that would in a few hours make their way through the rows of booths. We arranged packets filled with brochures, newsletters, bookmarks and website promotions. This year I also shared our new 14-day video discernment meditation series designed to open conversation and reflection of discernment. This series has been well received with more than 3,000 online views to date.

Following Youth Day at LA Congress Adult Days, Feb. 21 to 23, was themed “Live Mercy - Be Holy” and drew a total attendance of 21,156 people from around the world. What a wonderful experience it was to take a quiet moment of contemplation when the doors opened and the world church walked into the arena. Stepping inside were women and men rich in diversity, expression and confidence representing our Catholic faith tradition.

Sister Mary and I had wonderful conversations with women discerning religious life, full-time Catholic school teachers, CCD catechists, youth ministers and a wide assortment of active parish volunteers. Taking Pope Francis’ encouragement to heart, we had stepped out of the convent and were among the people of God! We listened as they shared stories of ministries, their hopes for the future and their dreams of continuing to create vibrant parishes in many cities, states and countries around the world. We shared with our visitors the good news of who we are as FSPA. We offered a Live Franciscan Peace resource packet and with it the invitation to share the information with women they know to be considering the call to religious life. We also encouraged our visitors to share the packet with their parish councils and church leadership to promote vocations in their parishes. We encouraged them to invite me to host vocation talks via Skype or Zoom, connecting me with today’s discerners and students, many of whom have never had a chance to ask questions of a sister. Many parishes no longer have sisters teaching in their local schools or even as members of their parish community.

As attendees walked away from our booth, I heard many remarks about how FSPA is reading the signs of the times and learning to connect in new, innovative ways. I even caught a “Wow, they have a blog and a discernment meditation video series.”

Even though some COVID-19 precautions were present at LA Congress, like encouragement to cover mouths and noses if sneezing, to refrain from touching faces, to stay home if feeling ill and to clean hands at sanitation stations located throughout the building, who would have predicted that just a few short weeks later the whole world would essentially shut down.

COVID-19 has temporarily changed our patterns but it will not stop women from discerning religious life. My hope is that, in the increased silence and slower pace, many women are taking more time to listen to God - who continues to call - and consider life as an FSPA .

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 fspa.org/content/s/refreshed-website-offers-visitors-new-opportunities

June 6, 2020

This spring we launched a refreshed FSPA website! The site, fspa.org, attracted more than 50,000 users in the last year (85% of which included new users who had never visited the site before). Together, these users viewed almost 200,000 pages during a total of almost 80,000 sessions, or visits to the site.

The FSPA Communication Office used Google Analytics, a tool that tracks and reports website traffic, to learn about the behaviors of fspa.org users and how to make the site more user-friendly based on visitor usage.

The refreshed site offers visitors:

- A modern, clean look.
- Four easy buttons on the [home page](#) to learn about becoming a [sister](#), [affiliate](#), [prayer partner](#) or [employee](#).
- Streamlined navigation.
- [Organized discerner FAQs](#).
- [FSPA land and garden tours](#).
- And more!

And while we've launched, we're not done! We're working to enhance the history page, continue building on our [justice and peace ministries](#) and adding easier access to the [Show me a sign blog](#) and [Messy Jesus Business blog and podcast](#).

Explore this refreshed site, send your favorite pages to a friend and invite them in for a (virtual) visit!

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June 10, 2020

FSPA Prayer Garden created in Viterbo University courtyard, Sister Genny recognized

Viterbo University has added a new garden honoring FSPA. According to Jim Salmo, vice president for advancement, “We had approximately 130 donors who gave varying gift amounts toward the garden. The response has been nothing less than remarkable and uplifting. We intend to have a sign at the entrance of the garden recognizing lead gifts, and at the dedication we will present the FSPA with a memory book of all who donated.”



The flower bed at the head of the garden, pictured above, is dedicated in memory of Sister Genny Morrissey. A plaque will be placed prior to the dedication, tentatively planned for August 2020.

According to Jim, lighting will be installed all around the garden, and there is a long-term plan to add a brick wall featuring a relief of St. Rose Convent.



[Learn more about the FSPA Prayer Garden.](#)

Sister Laurie Sullivan renews vows

Sister Laurie Sullivan renewed her vows May 18. She was originally scheduled to profess final vows on May 30, but that is now postponed until September 2020. Sister Laurie was

joined by the FSPA Leadership Team and via Zoom, many FSPA, family and friends.



FSPA honor George Floyd, take action to dismantle white privilege

FSPA, committed to unveiling white privilege, released a statement of action following the death of George Floyd. “I’ve seen a lot of people post Bible quotes and prayers asking God to heal our world,” says Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Sister Laura Nettles. “I think that is great, but I offer a clarifying reminder. Prayer requires a two pronged approach. In praying for healing, we must ask God to specifically change our hearts (the one who is praying, not some abstract other), and then we must act out of that changed heart. Our world will be healed when we, with God’s providence, heal the world.” [Read the full statement.](#)

And on June 5, Sister Eileen McKenzie was invited to offer a prayer during White Coats for Black Lives hosted by Mayo Clinic Health System in La Crosse.



Dr. Abigail Stockholm responded after the event with this message: “Thank you, Sister Eileen, for sharing the moving prayer today at the White Coats for Black Lives gathering. Thank you all for your presence, in person and in spirit. We appreciate your work toward social justice, efforts against racism and every form of harm against humanity, and all that you do to improve the well-being of every person who lives in communities. Looking forward to working together and improving the world through living our RICH TIES values – and proceeding in our endeavors with a combination of empathy, knowledge and action.”

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