

Re-envisioning TSSF Fellowships

Peter B. Stube, Formation Coordinator

As an order we sustain community in local Fellowships, yearly regional gatherings and the national gatherings. Since our fellowships are the places where community happens we may want to explore ways to create disciplines that enhance the Franciscan vision and values. With this essay I propose a way to address the strategic concerns addressed by Chapter in 2015; specifically the concerns to invite “millennials” to our order and the desire for more intentional life long formation. I offer these thoughts as a way of TSSF’s continuing renewal, inviting your reflections until we discern together the mind of Christ.

Franciscans are a missionary people in the best sense. We live in the world striving to know both the Gospel of God and the culture we serve so that we may enact God’s vision of justice with compassion, live God’s concern for the marginalized and the creation, and proclaim the Gospel in deed and word which softly transform the hearts of those we encounter. As we have disciplines for postulancy and our individual devotion, so we could benefit from discipline in our Fellowships that enhance our life long formation.

If we are to create ever-increasing intimacy and strength in the Fellowships, we might do well to adopt disciplines that deepen our companionship on the journey while also creating ways to invite others to our Fellowships.

1. We have a number of Tertiaries who do not have access to a Fellowship because they are too far away or homebound. Tracy Carroll at Tom Johnson’s request formed three Internet based Fellowships which have now been active for the past year. This has brought together into community Tertiaries who had no access to a Fellowship. We will want to expand these in the years ahead.
2. Can we be more intentional about our mission through our Fellowships? Elizabeth O’Connor has proposed a winsome way of being in fellowship called “mission groups” in which participants check in with each other and are accountable together for the journey inward (spiritual disciplines and rule of life) and the journey outward (activism, service, and mission).
 - a. A Fellowship’s members in this way of being would be engaged in their own Franciscan vocation and in the group’s common mission. Each of these missions is dependent on the spiritual gifts that members bring to the Fellowship and the contexts in which Fellowships live. It is these missions that become the basis for our accountability.
 - b. Mission groups are not therapy groups in which we try to solve life problems. Perhaps we can create pastoral care teams from each Fellowship who visit our shut-ins and help troubled members with ongoing deeper issues. Most of us are not trained therapists. The Franciscan movement has always assumed that its membership would find their therapeutic needs met with a counselor and their inner healing through the work with their spiritual director.

c. A member of the Fellowship does a deeper sharing of vocation and ministry at each gathering. The sharing of vocation and life is important in that it enables the sharer to integrate faith and work by talking it out and receiving encouragement from sisters and brothers. For the listener it is essential because we hear the incredible work that our Franciscan sisters and brothers are doing and how their spiritual disciplines sustain them. Their stories cause our faith to increase and our energy for mission be renewed. I have been humbled through the years to hear of the incredible acts of service and kindness that we Tertiaries are doing; therapy, spiritual direction, intercessory prayer, work among the poor of the inner city, lay and clerical ministries in the church. We offer rich gifts to each other as we share our pilgrimages of faithfulness.□

d. If we are to deepen the work of mission we must focus our order on mission. If we focus on personal sharing we can rehash the same weaknesses and issues session after session. By sharing mission we are encouraged to move where the Spirit is moving. In my parent's mission in Indonesia they discovered if they were about the mission Christ gave them to do, they would be healed on the way. As one whose ministry has been centered in the healing of parishes I learned that healing began to take place when we prayed daily together and discovered the ministry or mission that Christ had for us. He healed us while we were on the way.

3. Study to enhance our common mission must be a lifelong pursuit. Therefore another component of our Fellowships might be guided studies that focus on the Franciscan vision and values.

a. We might ask some of our spiritual mothers and fathers to write essays on values like simplicity, worship, mission, and creation that can be studied by all Fellowships. We can propose a bibliography for each theme so that those who wish to may go deeper.

i. There may be a study on the use of Scripture to inform our thinking, looking at the interpretation and deeper understanding of Scripture and current trends in Scriptural study.

ii. We might propose a five-year plan for study so that Fellowships can choose where in the studies they would like to begin.

4. The New Testament Church understood the importance of the Holy Spirit in the fellowships they planted. Paul never stayed in one place more than a year. Then he left faithful people like Priscilla and Aquila, Timothy, Lydia, and Titus to provide oversight under the direction of the Spirit.

a. Moving in the gifts and ministries of the Holy Spirit first century Christians transformed their world from Roman "peace" to the prince of peace.

b. When fellowships missed the mark, Paul sent pastoral letters to offer correctives.

- i. These rules of life and practice have long been a part of Franciscan tradition. Ministers General have written these sorts of pastoral letters through the years. Perhaps we can be even more intentional going forward.
- ii. There are other writers and thinkers that can inform our faith, understanding, and bring correction and redirection if we ponder them in the Spirit together. We often read those who are currently in vogue (not a bad thing), but a broader reading can give us a sense of the whole council of God's love as received in other times and places. Franciscans have always been willing to seek the truth wherever it leads, whatever it costs; witness Francis's conversations with the Muslims.

c. Franciscan Fellowships at there best have certain study disciplines in common:

- i. mission and life sharing and encouragement,
- ii. reflection on Scripture or the writings of Franciscans or other spiritual "masters" (the St. Pauls of each generation) that enable us to see other dimensions of the spiritual journey that we have not yet reached so that we may follow on the way and invite others to come with us.

5. Fellowship community prayer.

- a. We pray for life issues our members are facing,
- b. We pray in the Spirit to discern together what the Spirit is in inviting us to do.
- c. We pray together when we meet. We utilize the resources of prayer and Eucharist available to us from the various parts of the Anglican Communion because they have a way of teaching us of the vast diversity of Anglican worship. The Episcopal Church is now made up of 17 countries in Europe, Asia, South and North America, and this Franciscan Province is at least as diverse.)
- d. There is a growing TSSF hymnody that can enhance our prayer.

We Episcopalians have always "scripted" our worship, not in a rigid way, but in such a way that the Spirit is free to move among us and direct, empower, encourage, exhort and heal us and to lead us in activism, mission and service in the contexts in which we live. By tighter "scripting" of what our Fellowships engage--worship, study, life and mission reflection (individual and corporate)—might we give the Spirit more room to enliven us, to rebuild us?

I offer this essay for your consideration and wisdom quite aware that each Fellowship has its own personality, gift and mission. I believe that Fellowships can extend Franciscan mission and life long formation as we embrace clearer intentionality. In so doing members of the Third Order can more fully grasp the seamlessness of our

worship and our activism. A clear recovery of mission emphasis and action can provide a more winsome place for the “millennials” to gather and serve.