

Increasing Participation and Membership in the Secular Franciscan Order

Synopsis: This toolkit provides guidance for **increasing** participation and engaging current members in the community. It can help to increase visibility and support in the community and expand the **membership** base.

There are several elements that could go into recruiting new members for the fraternity:

- Word of mouth
- Promotion in the parishes, both active and passive
- Traditional media
- New media
- Widening the net
- Gifts
- Prayer

Word of mouth

First and foremost, it is assumed that the most effective method of recruiting new members to this, or any, organization is by people who are already members. This is an often-overlooked route for recruitment. And to overcome that we should make it a point to stress that at fraternity meetings, urging members to bring guests whom they feel would make worthy Franciscans. In order to assist members with that task we should provide them with recruiting materials such as will be discussed in this paper.

Promotion in the parishes

All membership must of course come from the grassroots, or parish level. Beyond the people we all meet in our own home parishes we should try to reach out to parishioners to inform them about the Order and the Fraternity. This could be done in two stages: first passively, with letters to the pastors and posters for the parish bulletin boards. (See appendices for sample letter and posters.); secondly, in parishes where sufficient levels of interest are indicated, speakers from the fraternity could go to discuss membership with interested people. Pamphlets and other leave-behind materials should be procured or developed.

Traditional media

Newspapers and newsletters are the traditional way we communicate with an audience broader than our immediate circle. Each diocese has a newspaper and every parish has a newsletter or at a minimum a parish bulletin. We should attempt to generate free publicity with news releases to these organs.

Additionally, we should consider placing small advertisements in the larger diocesan papers. Significant activities of the Fraternity or about the Secular Order in general could also be of interest to mainstream media as feature material; we should promote these events with releases to daily newspapers, radio and television.

New media

The Internet and the World Wide Web have become the medium of choice for small groups and for youth groups to keep in touch with their members and to reach a broader audience. The Franciscan family already has a very significant presence on the web with numerous sites; see a selection in the attached appendix.

Most internet providers supply webspace on their computers for subscribers. Perhaps a fraternity member who is not using the webspace for a personal website could be persuaded to donate it to the fraternity. Alternately, there are a number of commercial operators who make space on their computers available free-of-charge in order to promote advertising for their clients. Obviously, any commercial operator we might choose would have to be monitored very closely to ensure their advertising was not in any way objectionable or promoting products or services which are not compatible with our ideals.

Widening the net

1) Associate members: Christians of many different communities are searching for ways to make a greater commitment to living The Gospel. Keeping in mind the restrictions outlined in the letter of the Minister General concerning the National Council meeting of 28 April to 4 May 1995, Associate Membership could be offered to dedicated Christians of other faith communities. (See Appendix.)

2) Friends of Francis: Another possibility is to support a Friends of Francis. Anyone may apply to belong to the Friends of St Francis (FOSF), including the very young and the elderly, Catholics, Christians and non-Christians. The only

qualifications required are that the member has a personal devotion to St Francis of Assisi, or is interested in him, or wants to know more about him, and that he or she is approved for admission. (See Appendix)

3) Don't forget our Youth: Lastly, let's not forget our youth. YouFra communities are present all over the world and are not necessarily for young adults only. In some countries they are for children of any age and their structure is developed accordingly. (See Appendix)

Gifts

Sometimes we cannot pray, because we are fallen into a melancholy, and therefore have for the time lost our hope in our faith, and have no one to pray to. We have all experienced such times in our lives. Some of us can also attest that when we read the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, or recite it from memory, our melancholy is dispelled, our self-pity comes to an end, our faith is restored, because of this majestic conception of what the work of a disciple should be (Alan Paton, Instrument of Thy Peace)

Those words by one of South Africa's most beloved authors echo the feeling of so many people about St. Francis' prayer. What greater gift could we give people than a copy of this prayer, even on something so simple as a bookmark or printed on the back of a business card. Could people inspired by the prayer not be moved to at least consider a more active involvement with St. Francis? We should consider greater use of these simple gifts; the cost would only be pennies.

Prayer

Finally, we should not forget our most powerful too - prayer. All members of the fraternity should be encouraged to pray for new members to be sent to us. Additionally, we should encourage others to join us in this prayer, starting by asking the pastors we are writing to if, in addition to posting our recruiting posters, they would be so kind as to include our quest in the prayers of the faithful.