



Ecumenical/Interfaith Committee Walking Together

by Anne Mulqueen, OFS

Let me give you some background about the article you are about to read. The subject matter began as a nagging thought in the back of my mind that kept urging me to go beyond what I knew or what I thought you should know. I wanted our readers to be aware of what some of you are doing right now in the sphere of ecumenical and interfaith activity. So I decided to gather information from those of you currently involved in these activities. What did I want to accomplish? I hoped that by describing the participation of typical Secular Franciscans, it might inspire others to become involved.

In order to gather this information, I sent an email to present and past leaders of the National Fraternity and, in part, this is what I said:

The OFS has heard enough from Anne Mulqueen—now it's time to hear the voices of those on the front lines working with Ecumenical, Interfaith and Interreligious groups¹...if you know of someone who is actively engaged in peacemaking and dialogue across faith or denominational lines, would you ask them to send me a short blurb on what they are doing?

The responses to my email were so much more than I expected. They were encouraging and supportive, and came from many geographical regions throughout the United States. Unfortunately, I had to condense much of what I received to fit into this article. However, when I am able, I will direct you to the relevant website for more information.

Simply put, the purpose of this article is to move us from words to action. Let's be honest, articles can enlighten us, change attitudes and enable us to discuss issues intelligently, but words alone will never heal wounds or restore relationships. Without involvement with and love for people of other denominations and faiths, all our words are nothing more than noisy gongs or clanging cymbals.

We live in an age of mistrust and fear that is relayed to us instantaneously by the media. Anything—large or small—that we can do to lessen tension and

promote peace is better than saying, "Go in peace,"... and then doing nothing to promote peace. [Paraphrasing James 2:16.] And as Theodore Roosevelt said, "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are." So I plan to do what I can with the privilege I have of writing articles for *TAU-USA*. This privilege affords me the opportunity to reach every Secular Franciscan in the United States.

And now for the more important part of this article—let's look at what's happening around the country!

- ❖ A fraternity in TAU Cross Region each year invites Ken Norian, Minister General of the Third Order Society of St. Francis (TSSF), an Anglican/Episcopalian group, to one of their gatherings. Ken participates with them in an ecumenical prayer service, and this year Ken gave a talk on the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement Week of Prayer theme, "Jesus said to her, *Give Me a Drink*." For more information on TSSF go to <http://tssf.org>.
- ❖ A member of Troubadours of Peace Region, Deacon Juan Lezcano, in collaboration with the Methodist Church in his community, is involved in a program called "This I believe – Nearby World Religions." The religions presented are Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism.
- ❖ A fraternity in Mother Cabrini Region hosts a monthly meeting for interfaith dialogue. Their website states "Franciscan spirituality calls us to see how universal truths form a frame of reference for our sharing: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity..." See <http://wellspringsfo.com/spiritual-journeys/>.
- ❖ Members of St. Elizabeth of Hungary Region serve with a faith-based, non-denominational outreach center in Lowell, Mass. The Secular Franciscans work "shoulder-to-shoulder" with other churches "in [their] common passion to serve the poor...[and] to promote

unity and solidarity among the people of God.” For more information go to <http://www.livingwaterslowell.org>

- ❖ In Bl. Junipero Serra Region, a local fraternity works with the Interfaith Sustainable Food Collaborative, which educates participants regarding various faiths' beliefs surrounding food and hunger. In addition, they devise and implement methods to support family farms and sustainable farm practices and increase access to local healthy food for the poor. See <http://www.interfaithfood.org>.
- ❖ Another initiative in Bl. Junipero Serra Region is Sierra Roots, an organization dedicated to creating a strategic infrastructure to shelter the homeless in Nevada City, Calif. For more information go to <http://www.sierraroots.org/homelessness>.
- ❖ One of the initiatives in Lady Poverty Region, is an Ecumenical Soup and Bread Service, held each Wednesday of Lent. Six Christian churches participate, and each church assumes responsibility for providing either soup and bread or the service and special music. The host church provides the beverages and hospitality.
- ❖ The next three items were reported by a fraternity in Our Lady of the Angels Region.
- ❖ This fraternity participates in an organization called Bridges Outreach. Periodically they join with other members of Bridges and travel to New York to distribute meals, clothing and toiletries to homeless individuals. They buy the food, make several hundred brown bag lunches, and collect new clothing and toiletries for these individuals. Their objective is to create a sense of community and friendships based on mutual respect with those they serve. For more information go to: <http://bridgesoutreach.org>.
- ❖ This same fraternity volunteers four times a year with Family Promise, an interfaith organization that houses temporarily homeless families at various churches of all denominations for up to four months. Family Promise offers support services to the families including daycare, job training when needed, and assistance in finding permanent housing. The fraternity members bring meals, provide companionship, and play with children, and may stay overnight. For more

information go to: <http://familypromisehcr.org>.

- ❖ Members of this fraternity also regularly attend events sponsored by the North Jersey Christian-Muslim Project, which meets twice each year for evenings of dialogue, education and fellowship, at which talks on a common topic are presented and discussed from both the Christian and the Muslim perspective. The topic for March was "Mary the Mother of Jesus."

I was pleasantly surprised to receive a response from the Provincial Spiritual Assistant of Holy Name Province, Gene Pistacchio, OFM. Quoting directly from Fr. Gene's email:

The effort we are making is to reach out to our Muslim brothers and sisters. We used the Just Matters Learning Module entitled 'St. Francis and the Sultan.' We... invited a few Muslims to participate so that we could get to know one another, build trust and work together on common issues that affect humanity, like the environment, the economy, climate change, food and water sustainability, etc.

We enjoyed studying the module, which mutually helped us to share the basics of Islam and Christianity. We decided to have business and potluck dinners and picnics together, alternating the focus of our meetings every other month.

The desired result is to give witness to the fact that Catholic Franciscans and Turkish Muslims can work, support and even pray together for the common good of all people. This is extremely important given the presence of Islamophobia and the extremist terrorists wreaking havoc and extreme suffering and death in Syria, Iraq and the Middle East in general.

Our goal is to create peace and loving acceptance of one another... Lord, make us instruments of your peace! For further information go to <http://www.hnp.org/interfaith-dialogue-st-anthony-shrine/>

From what I have written—and I could have written more—it is evident that ecumenical/interfaith initiatives within the entire Franciscan family are alive and well. Those of us who serve in shelters and soup kitchens also engage in ecumenical and interreligious outreach, since no one checks the religious creed of the client he or she serves.

In my semi-rural community of Kingsville, Md., 10 square miles in area, we have 11 Christian churches—1.1 for every square mile. Yet in this community of churches, there is not one synagogue or mosque. We have vibrant ecumenical interaction, but practically

no interfaith relationships. My challenge is to foster interreligious relationships in my community—may God show you what is yours.

Peace and all good, your sister Anne

Definitions: **Ecumenical** - relations and prayer with other Christians; **Interfaith** - relations with members of the “Abrahamic faiths” (Jewish and Muslim traditions) - **Interreligious** - relations with other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Historically the OFS committee is called **The Ecumenical-Interfaith Committee**, but we remain open to respectful dialogue with all religious group.



Join Our Disaster Relief Team!



We have all seen the devastation caused by natural disasters. Not only are homes and buildings destroyed, but families are left in turmoil.

The National Fraternity is rolling out a plan to provide “hands on” assistance to people suffering from these disasters. Our efforts are beginning in Florida (the Five Franciscan Martyrs Region), where we will be working in conjunction with Catholic Charities. At a later date, this program will be expanded to other Regions of the country.

Our aid will be multi-faceted. Initially, Secular Franciscans will be prepared to handle the needs of infants and small children (providing diapers, pacifiers, nutrition, etc.). But assistance will not be limited to helping with these needs. We will also be available to work in other capacities depending

upon the skills of our volunteers (e.g., office, construction, medical, counseling, etc.).

We are encouraging every Secular Franciscan to consider being an active volunteer on our disaster relief team. You do not need to live in Florida to participate.

Age and physical strength are not requirements. Many of the jobs are in the nature of office work, the distribution of relief supplies, and “being present” to those who are suffering. Also, volunteers need not be Secular Franciscans; but, if they are not, they must be recommended by a Secular Franciscan. Volunteers must be at least 18 years of age.

Active volunteers will have great flexibility. When a disaster strikes, an assessment will be made of needs (e.g., the number of volunteers needed, special skills needed, the availability of accommodations for volunteers, etc.). Depending on the situation, not every volunteer will necessarily be called to help with each relief effort. And in every case, if you are asked to help you are always free to decline. We know that there can still be work, family, and other conflicts or costs that prevent you from responding to a particular disaster.

Volunteers are unpaid, and there will most likely be some out-of-pocket costs borne by each volunteer (for example, traveling to the disaster area).

Please join with us in this effort... going from the Gospel to life, from prayer to action.

To receive an application to join the disaster relief team or for more information, email Jim Flickinger, OFS at flickingersfo@prodigy.net, or call him at (616) 485-6183 or write him at 1456 Blythe Drive NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504.

More information will be forthcoming in future issues of TAU-USA as to how you can also participate in this program as a prayer partner or by donating towards the purchase of relief supplies.