

TROUBADOUR

The Newsletter of St. Francis House, New London, Connecticut



Center Section: **Discernment and Renewal at St. Francis House**

Epiphany 2014

Vol. 16, No. 1

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A TIME TO REFLECT AND A TIME TO LEARN

by Rick Bellows, TSSF

What is St. Francis House? Whatever the answer may be, it is a community that listens and learns. I know because St. Francis House recently invited about 40 people to gather twice to hear our answers to the question. My wife Danni Bellows and I were invited as new board members to listen and learn but also to share our perspective as longtime friends of St. Francis House. We live in Massachusetts an hour and a half away. That puts us beyond the reach of many of Saint Francis House's events but not beyond the reach of its influence. St. Francis House has blessed us since its early days through our Third Order Franciscan fellowship with other members of the Third Order including Paul Jakoboski, TSSF, and two others whom we remember with love, Emmett Jarrett, TSSF, and Mark Auer, TSSF.

The two St. Francis House meetings were initiated and led by Hannah Gant, a resident of St. Francis House; she also cooked two great vegetarian dinners. As one of the participants said, "What's great and unusual about St. Francis House meetings is how often those gatherings include getting fed!" Anne, Paul, Len and Ellen were all part of the Planning Team. The first meeting was held in two sessions, each with half the group, to maximize the input. There we identified strengths and weaknesses of St. Francis House and began to dream about possibilities. The second meeting gathered people who wanted to play an active role in next steps. There we formed groups to plan next steps based upon our interests in one of four key areas: Hospitality, Prayer, Communication, and Peace and Justice. Expect to see new and renewed initiatives emerging in the year ahead!

During the meetings I heard several people express confusion about what St. Francis House is and who is part of it. Responding to this uncertainty was a purpose of these gatherings. With the responses from the first sessions the Planning Team drafted a statement that describes what St. Francis House does and gave images to help us understand St. Francis House which are reprinted in the Center Section of this issue.

We think of St. Francis House as a place; it is two houses in New London, the original Saint Francis House and Victory House next door. These houses are home to several residents and to the offices of St. Francis House which over the years has been shared with groups with whom St. Francis House works: Homeless Hospitality, FRESH (the youth agricultural project) and now Hearing Youth Voices. The draft shared the image of St. Francis House as a hub from which people come in and go out. We also think of it as a harbor sheltering people needing refuge. Saint Francis House serves as hub and harbor through its hospitality, worship, clarification of thought and other study groups, and peace and justice work.

As powerful as it is to think of Saint Francis House as a place, I prefer to think of it as people. We may head out like spokes from a wheel's hub, hoping to change the world. At other times we may head into the loving arms of the community, hoping for renewal. St. Francis House includes the visitors who come and go and residents as well as the "extended community" of people and working relationships in the area.

Talking with other participants I heard of one image that currently is challenging St. Francis House: our being "an intentional Christian community." Whether seen as a place or as people, residents of St. Francis House have shared a Christian faith commitment and perspective and use the African Method of Bible Study (from the South African Liberation Movement) as their principle means of House formation and discernment. Yet Saint Francis House has attracted friends and allies- individuals and groups - who do not embrace the Christian faith. How do we understand the "extended SFH community" which includes by definition all those who gathered for these conversations and includes many both

now and in past community initiatives who do not embrace the Christian faith? I think we can understand how this works if we take hospitality to heart. After the examples of Jesus of Nazareth, St. Francis of Assisi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela, we can be open and hospitable to each other. Hospitality is at the core of St. Francis House and it is a hospitality that includes mutual aid and learning.

I found another image for Saint Francis House to be particularly intriguing: an experiment with truth. That is how Gandhi saw his life, and it is how the residents see their life together. They offer St. Francis House as a way of seeing life as a community. Certainly this process of discernment has been a wonderful experiment with truth. Like any experiment, the process involves data collection, evaluation, and discovery of best next steps. The way I read the data I see that the people of St. Francis House are changing the world through prayer, by cooking dinners and washing dishes and having conversations the whole time, by seeking and sharing clarity of thought, and through the pursuit of peace and the call for justice. Such people are who St. Francis House really is, and I am glad to be included.

Rick Bellows is an Episcopal priest. He and his wife Danni are tertiary members of the Anglican Third Order of the Society of St. Francis. The "T" of TSSF stands for "Tertiary." Rick and Danni have volunteered to work on Communications for this time of experiment.

Response from David Gonzalez Rice who works with the Homeless Hospitality Center and began attending Clarification of Thought gatherings this fall:

My family is new to New London and very new to St. Francis House. We love the plurality of cross-cutting communities we've discovered here, in which SFH occupies a special place. So we've become part of SFH's "extended community" just as that community has been invited to enter further into the life of the House. We are excited and full of questions.

Here's what I'm trying to figure out for myself: How might involvement in SFH further my spiritual growth as a Unitarian Universalist? How can I contribute to SFH's work in the surrounding community without treating the House as a mere means to the end of social justice?

To put the latter question differently: if prayer and contemplative life are central to SFH being SFH, but my own gifts tend toward action rather than contemplation, may I justly rely on the prayers of others? What do I owe them in return?

Said the poet: "Name me a man who is not a parasite, and I'll go out and say a prayer for him." This, it seems to me, is where SFH's experiment with truth is leading: to greater recognition of our dependence

on one another and opportunities to co-create beloved community.

Response from Joanne Sheehan, New England staff of War Resisters League based in Norwich, CT and an active member of the Voluntown Peace Trust:

I attended the two Community Conversations because I feel close to St. Francis House and grateful for their presence in the community. I share their commitment to nonviolence. I have been involved with many justice and peace projects that were initiated or hosted by St. Francis House. In addition I've participated in the St. Francis Fiesta and come to some Clarification of Thought evenings over the years.

But even with all this, I don't identify as part of the "St. Francis House Community." Why not? And who is? Clearly the residents are, and possibly the next circle around them which I think of as those who go to morning prayer and are more connected with "the House". Rick Bellows wrote of "the hub" and "the spokes." I feel like I'm on a spoke. Is the hub the residents? Plus the next circle out? Or is the outer rim of the wheel the defining circle around the community? But there are not events that bring together the people who are involved in the various spokes of St. Francis House as "community" or "extended community" and I don't even know who we all are.

I hope this process leads us to providing a space where we can all come together and increase communication. Networking would enrich both our sense of community and our ability to learn from one another and how to network to better do our work. But I don't feel a need for a structure that spends too much time defining who is in because then we are also defining who is out.

Response from Paul Jakoboski and Anne Scheibner, residents of St. Francis House who serve as the representatives of the House residents on the board of directors of St. Francis House:

We are very grateful for, moved and excited by the response of friends, neighbors and colleagues in the Community Conversations and now the follow-up. One of the disadvantages of living in the middle of St. Francis House is that we are often not aware of the impact we are having simply by being here and doing what we do - namely, prayer, hospitality and responding as issues emerge in the community.

Because we don't have a "program" as such, it is possible for us to respond substantively to needs as they emerge in the neighborhood, in the city and the region. Emmett, for example, could respond to the crisis of the then "winter-only" shelter because he saw sheltering those in need as a priority and could make himself available to help mobilize community support and St. Francis House itself could and did

serve as the interim fiduciary vehicle. We hope this experiment in extending the base of St. Francis House to include not only resident but extended community members will increase both our listening and responding capacity.

We hope the idea emerging in the Peace and Justice work group will include responding to the need identified by Joanne in her reflection; namely, bringing people together to develop a deeper understanding of issues confronting us. Economics was evidently a key theme in their initial discussions and we hope to extend better awareness about the potential of the Francis Fund as well.

We also hope the foundational aspect of St. Francis House as an "intentional Christian community" will emerge through this process. We certainly hope that David's questions will find a positive resonance. We are ready to explore alternative (i.e. later in the day!) times for corporate prayer while keeping the 8 am time for Morning Prayer and to seek out what feels in keeping for younger members of the extended community who might provide leadership for this part of the experiment. Deacon Ellen who is on the Prayer group will be doing some interviewing on this concern in the next several weeks.

Becoming clear about "Membership" - whether "resident" or "extended community" - is clearly a part of this discernment process. We think the line of inquiry developed for the next Clarification of Thought series will allow us to call and listen to the experience of other "intentional communities." We especially hope that those of you near and far who were not part of the initial Community Conversations will take advantage of the survey on page 7 or on the St. Francis House website. Thank you!



Multi-cultural Epiphany scene in SFH Chapel

Clarification of Thought Schedule

Winter-Spring 2014

Reflecting on Intentional Community:

- What is the "intention" of your community?
- Who gets integrated and how?
- What basic practices in your community define it?

St. Francis House is currently engaged in extensive conversation and discernment regarding new ways of participation by both resident and extended community members in the life and work of SFH. We thought a series focused on what makes "intentional" community intentional would be helpful. We also saw this as an opportunity to invite members of various intentional communities to share their experience. By press time it was not possible to nail down the exact dates for each of our guests but the following persons and communities and persons have been invited and expressed a desire to participate: Koinonia, Americus, GA; Hartford City Mission, Hartford, CT; St. Hilda's, New Haven, CT; Liz McAllister, Jonah House, Baltimore, MD; Linda Montano, former Maryknoll sister and video and performance artist, Kentaro Kumanomido, researcher.

Mark your calendars for the following Fridays:

- February 7 and 28 (note 3 week gap)
- March 14 and 28
- April 11 and 25
- May 9

5:30 Evening Prayer; 6 Supper; 7-8:30 Discussion

We will post the dates and presenters on the St. Francis House website as soon as we have confirmations. We will also be sending out an event-oriented e-newsletter so please fill out the survey at the end of this issue of the *Troubadour* and let us know your e-mail address!

Some questions have arisen about how we do Bible Study. Here is a brief summary of what we do:

African Method of Bible Study

We follow a distinct form of community Bible Study which has its origins in the South African Liberation Movement. Residents gather weekly to engage in this study. No one person is in charge of explaining the Scripture. We read the Gospel lectionary text of the day (i.e. we do not pick or choose the text) 3 times using 3 different translations. After a period of silence following the first reading we share what word or phrase stood out for each of us; on the second reading, what the Scripture is saying to each of us personally and on the third reading, what we each hear the passage saying to us as a community. At the conclusion of the study, we agree to pray for one another and each person says what they need prayer for specifically for the week ahead.

There is no discussion or cross-talk. Indeed this practice of listening carefully to each other is based on the assumption that God can speak to us through the words of our brothers and sisters. We use a shortened form of this Bible Study at Clarification of Thought during Evening Prayer.

How things happen:

SFH doesn't do things i.e. we don't do "programs" as such. It is the people who are called to / engage in doing things, and most of us are actively engaged in social justice work in various ways.

Over the years members of SFH have used SFH resources to assist in the initial stages and continuing support of several community initiatives, some of which have fledged to become organizations. This list includes FRESH, SECT Peace and Justice Network, Homeless Hospitality Center, CURE (Comunidad Unida por el Renacimiento de la Educacion/ Community United for the Renaissance in Education) and currently in active residence is Hearing Youth Voices.

Rick Bellows developed this illustration at right inspired by trying to distill what he had heard and learned at the Community Conversations he attended in November and December:

EXPLORING ON LIFE ST. FRANCIS

St. Francis House was founded in 1999—15 years ago this fall—as a “place of prayer, a house of hospitality and a center for peace and justice ministry.”

Saint Francis

*a House
a Home
a Harbor
a Hub...*



an experiment



Hannah Gant came to interview Paul and Anne about the Francis Fund in December, 2013 as part of her MBA on Local Living Economies since she was interested in loan fund possibilities in Connecticut. Paul and Anne invited her back to interview her and the result was her moving into the House to help develop the Francis Fund. She suggested the Community Conversations as a way of exploring current and possible capacity of the House for that work and to help us all discern how to understand issues around House membership.

Photo left: The November 18 Community Conversation at Victory House. The December 9 gathering looked at next steps.

AND REFLECTING AT HOUSE

In the next issues of the Troubadour we will be exploring the various dimensions and possible developments in Prayer, Hospitality, Peace and Justice and Communication which the Community Conversations have opened up.

Francis House

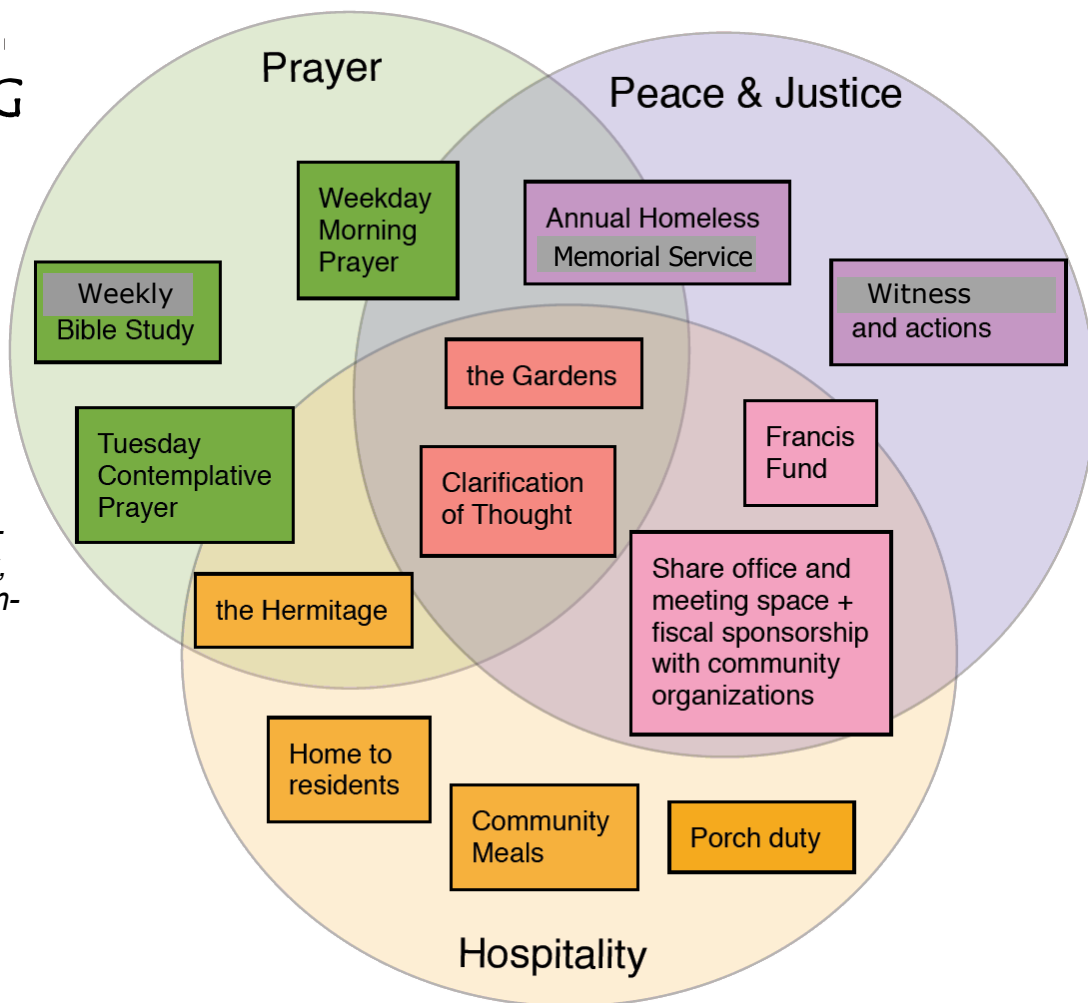
of Hospitality

of Prayer

of Peace and Justice

of Clear Thinking

t with truth

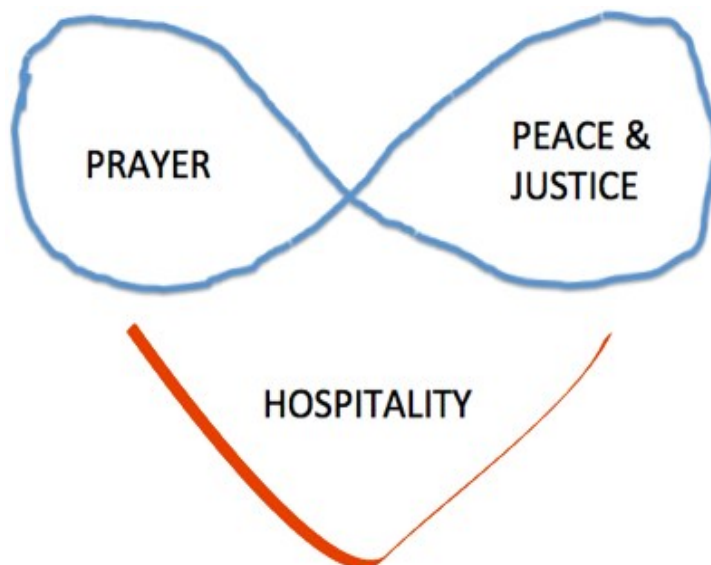


Hannah's Venn Diagram above helps illustrate how different activities of the House fall into one or more aspects of the life of the House. For example, the Gardens and Clarification of Thought are part of all three and the use of the Hermitage, a semi-detached unit of 30 Broad St., is available for retreats and is part of the hospitality we have offered over the years both short and longer term. Below she used the infinity loop to visualize the connection between Prayer and Peace & Justice. Hospitality undergirds both:

Sharing what we have

Hannah's inspiration behind these visuals:

"Integral to SFH is a set of values that has us see and feel the world more collectively. We are in this together and the more we share with one another the less each of us has to worry and work to meet all of our needs individually. There are many ways in which we try to share our resources--the Hermitage for retreat and respite, the office and meeting space, and principally as a home to those who anchor SFH. The most recent experiment is with the Francis Fund, in which we are exploring how to share financial resources to spark regional and sustainable economic development."



Francis Fund Update

by Hannah Gant

A significant focus of fall 2013 has been on the community inquiry into St. Francis House's next chapter of life. It has been a gift to me to play a role in helping the people at the center and the periphery to hear each other's diverse experiences and begin to see SFH through new eyes. This dialogue and re-framing has generated possibilities for different ways of sharing the work that will open up new pathways for all who are a part of St. Francis House to have a role. Exciting!

Meanwhile the work of the Francis Fund for Southeastern CT has continued to percolate. The beginning of December saw Anne, Paul, and me traveling up to Amherst to meet with Jim, Rebecca, and Rob from Equity Trust in their beautiful new work space in an old Amherst church. This was an opportunity to share the progress our St. Francis House team had made since I returned from the West Coast in September. We put our heads together to look forward while renewing our formal contractual relationship. We left open for experimentation how best to share the work between Equity Trust and St. Francis House as our local capacity begins to increase.

A principle part of the recent work has been bringing in a few new people to serve on the Francis Fund Advisory Committee to review loan requests and be ambassadors for the fund in their respective work and communities. Anne and I have tried to meet with one person per week to help with this recruitment and relationship building. Peg Moran, a flower farmer from Stonington and inveterate entrepreneur has agreed to join the team. So has Laura Natusch, a soap maker from New London who narrowly missed a seat on City Council. Both are civic-minded students of sustainability.

Anne and I have also initiated a strategy we are calling "hosted meetings," in which we request time on the agenda of a community organization's regular meeting schedule to present the Francis Fund. We explain that the Francis Fund is a way to share financial resources and is also a local investment opportunity for individuals and organizations. In November we met with the New London NAACP chapter. Moving forward, we have set a goal of doing one hosted meeting per month.

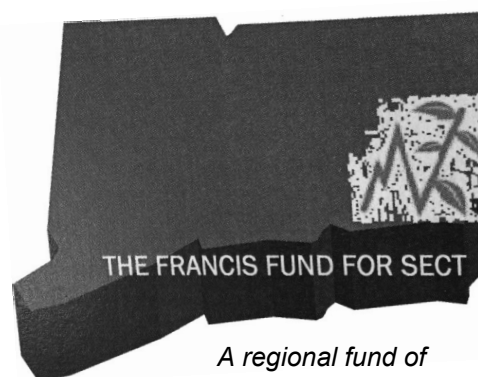
We have also recently met with the new executive director of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, Maryam Elahi, and staff members Alison Woods and Barbara Morgan. We presented the Francis Fund and also discussed the movement presently taking shape in the community foundation world towards mission related investments. They are interested to learn more about broadening the scope of their work to include focused mission investment. Other community foundations around the country are also exploring this option.

Part of the work of this fall has been the development of criteria to guide our lending decisions. Most loan funds have a specific mission such as expanding homeownership; Equity Trust's focused mission is to help people think differently about the ways they hold property. What makes the Francis Fund distinct is that the boundary of our scope is tied to place rather than any one issue. With the broad intent of "supporting and promoting a sustainable, just regional economy" in Southeastern CT, the criteria that we need to support us in our discernment of project proposals is more complex.

While completing my MBA program I was introduced to systems thinking as a framework for understanding complexity. Leaning on this conceptual tool, we have begun the criteria development process by articulating some of the underlying dynamics of our economic system that need to shift in order to facilitate the transition to a better way of meeting our needs for goods and services. One example of this is looking for ways to move from competitive to collaborative dynamics. A manifestation may be focusing Francis Fund lending to cooperative business models that have a structure that builds in shared work and ownership.

As a renewed Advisory Committee is constituted and improved processes to support the work are formed we are better positioned to respond to a farm infrastructure proposal that came to us in December. We are pleased to have this work before us to keep us focused and test all that we have developed.

Hannah Gant is an entrepreneur coming out of food system work in CT. She recently completed an MBA focused on finance and local economic development.



*A regional fund of
Equity Trust and St. Francis House*

Supporting and promoting a sustainable,
just, regional economy.

St. Francis House Survey



Dear *Troubadour* Readers:

As we engage in this ongoing inquiry process, it is important to hear from all members of our extended community, including the *Troubadour* readership. We invite you to join us in this discernment by sharing your experience and perspective through this survey, which is also available on our website: www.stfrancishouseNL.org. Please feel free to respond to this survey by email or letter. Email: anne@stfrancishouseNL.org

Name:

Email:

Mailing address:

How did you come to know about St. Francis House? What have been your connections?

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