

Serving on the Board of Franciscans International

Clark Berge SSF

God so loved the world that he didn't send a committee.

This was a plaque my mother displayed in her office as 'sanity insurance' because she served on many different boards. Nevertheless, as Pentecost proved, Christ's first gift to the Church was a Spirit that empowered a small group of people to work together to figure out how to promote a message that has brought hope and joy to the world for over two thousand years.

The Board of Directors of Franciscans International is a hard-working group, representing most of the Franciscans around the world, all of whom are members of the six Catholic Franciscan orders and the Anglican Society of St. Francis. The six years I have spent on the board have given me an opportunity to befriend Franciscans from around the world, and to help direct and celebrate the work of furthering our Franciscan aims of honoring the dignity of all people and protecting the integrity of creation.

One of the best ways to promote Christ's work and mission is to have as many Spirit-led people as possible involved in directing an organization, providing oversight to the hands-on leadership, and scrutinizing budgets to be sure our values are made clear in our financial priorities. Group decision making is not always cumbersome, and when an ecumenical group of Franciscans gather from around the world, representing thousands of brothers and sisters, there is a lot more going on than knocking together the dry bones of administration.

Flesh and spirit make the documents and reports come alive. Franciscan brothers and sisters and our mission to make a difference in the world are at the heart of our attention. Franciscans International has been cited for best practices in getting global attention

brought to issues of concern to local Franciscans. Catholic brothers and sisters in Benin brought the plight of 'witch children' to the attention of the United Nations. Franciscans have fought for inclusion of key qualifiers in international agreements, such as the inclusion of the simple word 'clean' in the acknowledged human right to water. Our own brothers in the Solomon Islands have submitted valuable research and testimony about logging in the Islands, collaborating with the FI Coordinator for Asia-Pacific in anticipation of the upcoming universal periodic review (UPR) of the Solomon Islands. With the help of the FI Americas Program Coordinator TSSF members in the Province of the Americas with personal experience of the degradation of the environment through mining in Guyana and the terrible impact on the Acawaio tribe and the larger Amerindian population there, contribute to alerts sent to the UN with information. These are the kinds of activities the Board of Directors supports and facilitates through oversight of the Strategic Plan and organizational goals, monitoring administration of budgets, personnel and program administration, supporting staff in their work in many different ways. In addition to these corporate activities of the board, I have been delighted to serve as an English language proofreader for many

of the reports and publications.

Serving on the Board has been a tremendous privilege and an encouragement in my vocation. Sitting around a board room munching sandwiches and chips, there is no extravagance. But then the deli detritus is removed, and a candle lit, and we celebrate the presence of Christ in simple prayer services conducted in at least three languages — English, Italian, and Malay, often German too. Every Saturday evening of a board meeting we meet for Eucharist, sharing the insights into our work and mission prompted by the Scriptures.

For the last three years I have served as Secretary of the Board. I had rather hoped to be elected Vice president, who has relatively little to do unless the president is incapacitated. Fortunately, our board president is hale and hearty. As secretary I have to pay close attention, trying to capture discussion involving UN language and Catholic Franciscan personalities and ecclesiastical concerns I have never heard of before. As a former Minister General, I sometimes asked my General Secretary during a meeting: 'Did you get that?' He would patiently smile and nod. Ha! The chickens have come home to roost. The Board members are very patient with me when I ask for spellings and other clarifications!

Within the Society of St. Francis, it is agreed that representation to the board will alternate between Third and First Order members. I followed Averil Swanton TSSF, and after me is Blair Matheson TSSF, Minister Provincial of the Province of the Pacific. His appointment is from April 2021 until April 2024, with another term after that if all the heavenly spheres align and he consents. His first board meeting will be May 2021 in Assisi, health advisories permitting. Within the Society of St. Francis, the representative to the Franciscans International Board is responsible for communicating with the Ministers General about the work of the Board, as well as the occasional presentation or article for a newsletter.

FI celebrated 30 years last year, and we marked the occasion with three big events, in Geneva, Rome and New York. We had hoped to meet the Pope, but July is his time for holiday. November 2019 found us in New York in the sparkling board room of the UN Secretary-General António Guterres. He made it clear the witness of FI was highly valued by him and is an important voice in the UN. Through Franciscans International the greeting and challenge of Francis ring in the 21st century: 'To all the Heads of State and bearers of power in this world, Brother Francis of Assisi, your little one and humble servant, wishes you peace and all good.' *f*



At the UN November 2019. From left: Markus Heinze OFM, Executive Director, Clark Berge SSF, Kevin Queally TOR, Carla Casadei SFP, Ruth Marcus OFS, Joseph Rozansky OFM, Joseph Blay OFMConv., James Donegan OFMCap.