



Welcome to Your Regional Gathering

Our Regional Gatherings evolved as a result of the 2014 Study of the Associate Relationship. A large percentage of Associates indicated that they sought more opportunities to deepen their spiritual life through the Associate Relationship and favored small group gatherings. You made that selection.

A Regional Gathering can be defined as a small faith community of Associates choosing to be together either face-to-face or by phone. Supporting our Commitment statement, “we commit ourselves through relationship to living more fully the mystery of community...are drawn together through prayer and bound together through mutual support.” Our purpose for gathering is to spiritually grow and support each other through prayer and discussion.

Face-to-face groups will consist of 7-10 people and phone groups will be 5-6 people. The face-to-face groups will be designed so that Associates will travel as short a distance as possible to get to a designated site. The phone groups will use a simple conferencing system and may join with Associates from across the country.

This packet contains *suggested* guidelines as to how often to gather, how long the gatherings may be and what to discuss. You will find readings, discussion topics and guided questions on the Congregation website. Since these are guidelines and not requirements, each group will determine how best to function. Each group will have a selected convener who will meet periodically with the co-coordinators of the Regional groups, Nancy Davis and Cathy Kerns.

These regional gatherings are for Associates, although there may be locations and opportunities when Companion Sisters will attend. Candidates preparing to be Associates may attend the gatherings and the group may decide to use the materials the Candidate is using, praying and discussing the material together.



What Small Associate Gatherings are Already Doing

Before composing these guidelines, we contacted five groups of associates who already meet regularly, to get their input as to how their groups work, including what to do, what not to do. What better way to start than getting ideas from those already doing it!

This is what we learned:

- Form as **prayer** groups – Individuals in the groups desired a more prayerful gathering and not a social function. They wanted their time together to be prayerful either through Scripture or a meaningful program that would help them to nourish their spirit. Leave food for another kind of gathering.
- Hold gathering to one hour – This allows members to commit to the schedule when they know the time frame is followed and they don't have to worry about being late to another commitment.
- Meet monthly – Important to meet on a regular basis to keep the continuity of one's prayer life and build a sense of community.
- Invite others for special programs – This practice allows others to join your group but doesn't disrupt the normal gatherings where a level of sharing and trust has been formed.
- Maintain flexibility in programs – A variety of formats is used in most groups to keep interest; not everyone prays or learns the same way.
- Keep group small – Less than ten people allows schedules to come together easier and allows for more intimate fellowship.
- Have a designated convener – Each group had one go-to person who regularly called the group together making certain everyone knew of the time and any items needed for the gathering.
- Rotate who leads the gatherings – As in "flexibility" above, each member brings a different background and style of presentation to the group. Thus a variety of styles can be used although still using the same format. (Example: one group does scripture study, and each member presents in his/her own style, using different media and delivery.)

Working from the above suggestions, we present you with some *suggested* guidelines to aid in getting started. Once you have come together for a while and get to know one another better, you will ultimately find what works best for your gatherings.



GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR REGIONAL GATHERINGS

PRAYER DISCUSSIONS

Prayer Discussions will be the hub of a Regional Gathering. They are the primary purpose for gathering together.

You will find prayer discussions and services on the Associate webpage. They are developed to not only provide a prayerful, reflective, and enlightening spiritual experience, but to incorporate the Congregation's history, wisdom, and charisms into our thoughts that we might live more deeply our faith in our everyday life. We are grateful to Sr. Peggy Quinn, Roberta Spencer and others for sharing a wide variety of prayer discussions they have developed over the years.

Prayer discussion services will carry a multitude of themes, including, but not limited to:

- Social Justice Issues
- Aging
- End of Life
- Seasonal (related to Nature or Church)
- Corporate Stances

In turn, we have Discussion Guides for each chapter of our Associate Manual. Those, too, can be found on the website. Our candidates are using them and if a candidate has joined your group, you may wish to use them with him/her.

It will be the responsibility of the Hosts to decide how to present the prayer discussions within their group - adding elements, modifying, and adapting to fit your group. Is the group musical? Is scripture an integral part of the time together? How much sharing or discussion time is allotted?

Although we encourage the use of these prayer discussion guides developed for our Regional Gatherings, we understand that there will be times when a group chooses a topic specific to their

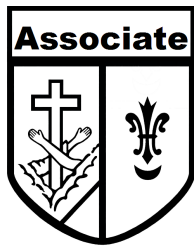


interest or need. If you choose to develop other discussions, please share them with the Associate Office so that other regional groups might have the opportunity to consider their use. We encourage feedback from your use of the posted topics so that we can continue to offer prayerful and fulfilling prayer discussions that fit the needs of all of our Regional Groups.

Suggested Format

Begin and end on time

7-10 min	Checking-in – Casual chatting, sharing something about last gathering that lingers with them or something that happened to them since last you met
5 min	Quiet, reflective music to bring everyone into God's presence
40 min.	Prayer and discussion
5-8 min	Announcements wrap-up, closing prayer



MAKING THE GATHERING HAPPEN

There are three roles that make up the Regional Gatherings.

The Convener

Each group has a convener. This person will be responsible for starting each group and keeping it organized and running with a positive, prayerful tone.

Responsibilities of the Convener would include:

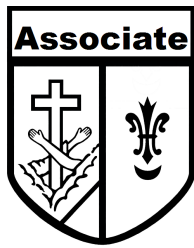
- Making initial contact with the Regional Group members to obtain pertinent information such as available dates and times for a gathering.
- Keeping group members' contact information up-to-date.
- Working with program hosts to plan successful gatherings.
- Reviewing prayer discussions on the Associate webpage to be able to suggest those that might best accommodate their group's interests.
- Meeting periodically with the Regional Group Co-Coordinator(s) to share successes, needs, suggestions from their regional group, and feedback on the prayer discussions used.
- Sharing information from the Associate Office on events, needs.
- Coordinating how the group connects with your designated Outreach and Prayer Associate(s).

The Monthly Host

The host of the meeting changes each month. Each group member is encouraged to be a host at least once each year. The host will choose a prayer discussion to facilitate at one of the group's gatherings and determine where to meet. There are a variety of prayer discussions on the Associate webpage under Documents.

Responsibilities of the Host would include:

- Perusing the topics offered on the Associate website and choosing a prayer discussion (s)he would like to prepare for presentation to their group.
- Choosing a prayer discussion at least two months in advance of their scheduled



presentation and work in conjunction with the Convener to get the program on the group's schedule.

- Asking yourself questions to ensure the prayer service fits the needs of your group. Does your group like more scripture than discussion; more prayer than reading material; discussion questions to take home and think about until the next gathering; a few thought provoking questions offered to the group prior to the gathering? You will want to make it fit your group and will want to lead with your unique style so that you are comfortable with your materials.
- Contacting other group members at least five days prior to the gathering with a reminder of date/time, any materials needed to bring, and location or the conference call number, if applicable.

Participants

Being a participant in the prayer discussion is the most frequent role each group member has. What you bring to each gathering--your attitude, your enthusiasm, your energy, your prayerfulness, and your ability to reflect will form the spirit of your group and when positive, will support a meaningful experience for all. Here are some helpful hints:

- Share ideas so others feel you are part of the group.
- Pace your sharing so others have plenty of time to share.
- Be comfortable with moments of silence.
- Speak clearly and loudly enough so others can hear and understand you. This is especially important if you are conducting a phone gathering.
- And specifically for a phone gathering: until you know each other's voice, announce your name when you are speaking.

In General

1. We encourage rotating homes/locations to gather, based on gathering host's preferences.
2. We encourage each group member to host at least one gathering a year so that you will have a diversity of talents shared.
3. We discourage serving food, unless for a special occasion. It is one hour of gathering and food invites greater length and complexity to hosting, especially when the purpose is prayerful reflection.



HINTS FOR CONDUCTING A PRAYERFUL GATHERING

For the Host

- After some brief friendly sharing, begin the prayer discussion with quiet reflective music or silence so that participants can join together in a communal and spiritual manner.
- Present the theme of the discussion and share information of why you chose it.
- Lead the group through the prayer discussion, pausing after a question and allowing silence if it happens. Feel comfortable with quiet moments and don't feel obliged to be the first to offer an idea. If the quiet seems too long, ask the question again—maybe in another way.
- You will probably have over-talking as one ground rule you want to control. If you have an individual who still tends to dominate, you will want to take her/him aside and ask her/him to limit responses.
- If you have an under-talker, you will want to give her/him a few sessions to feel comfortable. If participation still seems to be lacking, you may want to talk with them privately and ask what would make them more comfortable to share. You don't ever want to call on individuals. You can say, "We haven't heard from everyone; anyone else wish to share?" Pause, pause, pause.
- See p. 4 for suggested time frame.



OUTREACH TO THOSE NOT IN A REGIONAL GROUP

There are Associates who are unable to participate in a regional group. Their reasons vary. As we grow our small faith communities, we want to make sure that every Associate is remembered. They are companions on our journey and we want to reach them minimally in prayer.

In order to companion with every Associate, we ask each regional group to adopt those who are unable to participate in a small group. To facilitate the adoptions, we have assigned individual associates to your group.

How you choose to reach out to them is up to each group. Each regional group, as is true for each Associate, will have its own style of outreach. Ideas include sending “thinking of you” cards and sharing prayer discussion. Perhaps, if they are able, you may wish to call them periodically. We will give you as much information as we can about your outreach/prayer associates. Attached is what Associate Eileen Hartke offers an approach which combines a well-being check-in with prayer.

As Eileen says:

The more we get to know one another the more we can be in community with one another. Sharing knowledge of good books, prayers, good works, ministries, and knowing that no matter what or where we are we are not forgotten in our undertakings as Franciscan Associates. Staying in touch and connected revives us, renews us, strengthens us on our journey, and helps us to be more present to one another.



Phone or Pen Outreach Ministry (Sample)

Format (sample) Greeting:

Hello, my name is _____ and I am a Franciscan Associate from _____. We have not had the privilege of meeting but my hope is that we will become fast friends through our mutual relationship with the sisters.

A little past history:

I have been an Associate for _____ years and truly enjoy my association with the sisters. It is so nice to have a strong connection to prayer partners and community, spiritual resources, retreats, etc., etc. Tell me about yourself.

Faith sharing:

I have a small quote to share with you today: "Be still and know that I am God." What are the gentle nudgings of this quote saying to you and me today?

Closing Prayer:

Most dear and gentle God, please bless my new friend _____. May you continue to reign down your blessings upon her. Help us to continue to be a strong Franciscan influence in the lives of those we meet and by our example may they come to know you more fully.

Closing:

(Phone Pal) – I hope that we can do this again soon. What is a good day and time for you?

(Pen Pal) – I hope to be hearing from you soon. If you cannot write perhaps you can have someone let me know and I will be happy to continue writing to you. It is always so nice to get joyful mail.

Until we meet again, God Bless You.

(Sample provided by Eileen Hartke)



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What IS the purpose of these small groups? To have a shared opportunity for small Associate encounters, supporting our spiritual growth and development.

What about serving food at our meetings? We discourage serving food because it lengthens the meetings and can take on more importance than the essential “meat” of the meeting. Each group can decide what works for them.

Can I change to another group? Can others join our group? What about an occasional visitor? What about inviting Sisters?

We aim to have an open, fluid attitude about group membership. “Mi casa es su casa.” So without judgment or concern, Associates can shift to other groups. If in the neighborhood, they can attend another group’s meeting. Sisters can be invited periodically. Please keep the Associate Office informed of any permanent membership shifts. A consideration: you do not want permanent membership over 10 for face-to-face groups or over 6 for phone groups. Please make sure the monthly host knows about anyone you invite.

When it is my turn to host, where do I find prayer discussions?

The general answer is any resource that is important to you. Ready to use Prayer Discussions can be found on www.jolietfranciscans.org in the Associates section, Associate Documents Also available by the end of September is the newly revised Associate Manual with reflective discussion questions for each chapter. Feel free to browse and select any you wish.