

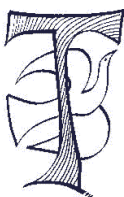
Communio Special Edition

ARG 2026

That All May Be One
Newsletter of the Brothers and Sisters of St. Francis Region
Secular Franciscan Order



Spirituality



Formation



Fraternity



Apostolate



ANNUAL REGIONAL GATHERING 2026

Minister's Letter



Joy and Gratitude!

Greetings in my dear sisters and brothers,

The joy was everywhere and my heart is full of joy and gratitude for all who were a part of: "Into New Life: Celebrating the Easter of St. Francis", ARG 2026.

Every year we gather is a special time to reconnect and build new relationships with our sisters and brothers. Like Our Father Francis and the brothers, we come from near and far. Our Region is large, yet we had family come from all 4 corners of the Region, St Elizabeth of Hungry, Elizabeth City, NC, Scared Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Bluffton, SC, St Joseph of Cupertino, Bessemer, AL to St Clare, Asheville, NC. Did you know that's a circumference of 2,000 miles.

We came to pray, sing, learn and enjoy a meal together. To hear each other's stories to laugh and sometimes cry as we share each other's pain and lift each other up to God. Franciscan Joy!!

Each laugh, each smile, each tear is a gift from you, which I cherish. You are all deeply loved.

May the Lord bless and keep you safe.

Till next year.

Your sister in Christ

Ellen

State of the Region

Currently:

Professed Members 491

Candidates 63

Inquirers 16

Aspirants 11

581 in the Region

25 Fraternities

2 Emerging Fraternities

17 fraternities w spiritual assistants, 10 w/o

18 of our sisters and brothers have met Sister Death since we last met. Each one unique and a gift from God.

We miss each one. With a special thanksgiving for our sister Audrey Binet. Audrey was our 2nd Regional Minister and served 2 terms, She was a Spiritual Assistant and worked with Fr Linus who was our RSP to develop the 4 Pillars.

She truly was a servant leader.

New Regional Spiritual Assistant

Fr Hugh Macsherry, OFM Our Lady of Guadalupe Province

We are grateful for Fr Bob Menard's servant leadership over the past 3 years. And that he will continue to help the Region with SA Formation

Spiritual Assistant 5 appointments Since Dec, 2025

2 Friars, 1 Poor Clare, 2 Secular

- Fr Bill Robinson, OFM Conv to Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, Burlington, NC
- Sr Bernedette to St Francis of the Hills, Hendersonville, NC
- Fr Robert Reez to St John Vianney, Litha Springs, GA
- Dave Shick to St Thomas More, Wilmington, NC
- Charlie Comberrel to St Michael the Archangel, Spartanburg, SC

If you are curious and would like to know more about the SA role, please reach out one of our SA's. The Region cannot support our growing fraternities without their dedication.

REC appointments

Vera Walker – Multicultural Animator

Fran Acosta – Youth and Young Adult Animator

They both are excited about their new roles. Looking forward to their ideas and energies.

Backbone of who we are is Formation, initial and ongoing.

Monthly Formation Forums given by Lynn Oeser. Our FD, SA's and anyone involved in Formation (which are all professed) are welcome.

Held 10 Elections and 7 Visitations

Thank you to our Fraternity Councils who work so hard to prepare for them, the members who offer gracious hospitality and our Spiritual Assistants and Councilors who conduct them .

Joint Fraternity Activity

Retreats, Transitus

Please continue these joint family events

My travel, I did get out to visit several fraternities, not as many as I'd like.

St John Vianney, Lithia Springs, GA

Immaculate Conception, Jonesboro, GA

St Thomas More, Wilmington, NC Profession

St Francis of the Hills – attended their annual retreat

Poor Clares in Travelers Rest

Fraternity of Brother Francis – visit

St Padre Pio, Lancaster, SC Profession, Gathering and Formation

St Joseph Cupertino, Bessemer, AL – visit

Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Bluffton, SC – visit

Bl John Duns Scotus – Profession

Franciscan Family of Greensboro – celebration of their 30th anniversary

It's a crazy big Region, I'm glad I purchased a hybrid.

YouFra Activity

St Clare – Winston Salem continues their out reach to Wake Forest University Catholic Center –
Elizebeth Sandy has lead the charge here.

St Maximillian Kolbe has been reaching out to UNC Charlotte, the Dir Campus Ministry and the OLG
friars. Fran Acosta is leading the charge here.

REC continues hold to Meet & Greet Zoom calls with newly elected Councils.

Thank you to all who worked so hard so we could all gather:

2 planning committees Programs and Logistics

Registration – Lee Cunningham

Registration Table and Name Tags– Michaelleen David and St Michael the Archangel members

Book store – FFG, Jeanne Kiley

Thank you as you live out your call to be Secular Franciscans!!!

Peace and all good.

Ellen

Talks and homilies from the ARG can be viewed on the regional website at:

ARG 2026

A Sacred and Privileged Space

by Lynn Oeser OFS, Regional Formation Director

We celebrated the Easter of St Francis at this year's Annual Regional Gathering of the Brothers and Sisters of St. Francis Region. We recalled the transitus of St. Francis to new life and we probed our own time we have left on earth.

What turning are we called to? What is our story for the rest of our lives?

Darleen Pryds, our speaker this year, spoke of the "spirituality of presence" when referring to the roles of laypeople in the events of history and in the present day. She sees and pulls out subtle clues in documents that refer to the roles and duties that ordinary, sometimes unnamed laypeople attended to.

Reflecting on the spirituality of presence, I think about the first Chapter of Mats in 1221 as recorded in the Little Flowers of St. Francis, Chapter XVIII. 5000 lesser brothers descended upon St. Mary of the Angels. They gathered to discuss organization of the order, practices of their spirituality, and to engage in fraternal encounter. There was no logistical planning. The brothers slept on mats. St. Francis commanded them to not give thought to food, but to pray. According to the story here is what happened:

St Dominic, who was present, wondered much at this order of St Francis, considering it as indiscreet, for he could not understand how such a great multitude could exist without taking thought for the body. But the heavenly Pastor, our Blessed Saviour, wishing to show the care he takes of his lambs, and with what singular love he loves his poor servants, put into the hearts of all the people of Perugia, of Spoleto, of Foligno, of Spello, of Assisi, and of all the neighboring country, to take meat and drink to that holy congregation; and presently men came from all these places with horses, and asses, and carts laden with bread and wine, with beans and cheese, and other good things of which the poor of Christ had need. [The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi](#)

Lay people in the neighboring towns made present their charism of presence by hearing Christ's call and attending to the needs of the brothers. Lay people like us, my dear brothers and sisters.

ARG is our Chapter of Mats. We bring ourselves to be present for each other. We celebrate holy Mass and pray together to nurture our *Spirituality*. We share our life stories and contribute to the *Formation* of one another. We share meals and make ourselves present to our sisters and brothers in *Fraternity*. We address necessary business for the good of the order and we work together in an *Apostolate*. We are called to be in relationship and to embrace the Spirituality of Presence to one another.

"The brothers and sisters are co-responsible for the life of the fraternity to which they belong...The sense of co-responsibility of the members requires personal presence, witness, prayer, and active collaboration...."
(GC 30, 1-2-)

A bittersweet parting is customary at the end of every Regional Gathering. Our prayer is that by grace, the gift of fraternal presence in that privileged space kindles our spirits to go out into the world and do what is ours to do.

A Shared Franciscan Spirit

Carolyn D. Townes, OFS

As I took my seat for the opening sessions of the 2026 Annual Regional Gathering, I expected a weekend of learning, conversation, and connection. What unfolded was even richer. Guided by the richness of our keynote speaker, Dr. Darleen Pryds and her stories of Saint Francis and his followers, we were invited to reflect on challenging questions, explore new perspectives, and engage one another in meaningful dialogue. This is a style Darleen is known for and a wonderful way to set the tone for the weekend.

For me, the experience became especially poignant when I had the opportunity to join our Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Animator, Allison Salerno and her husband, Gregory Trevor for a September 11 discussion, a conversation that reminded me of the enduring power of memory, reflection, shared understanding, and shared sorrow. Greg, a 9/11 survivor, spoke so movingly about his experience that severely clear Tuesday morning. I added my stories of Friar Mychal Judge, OFM, whom I had known and served with.

What was wonderful for me was knowing that everyone had a story. After the panel discussion, so many of our members came up to me to share their stories along with their tears and their hugs. I was delighted to know that my story brought out other stories – stories perhaps shared previously or never shared at all. The 9/11 panel discussion bonded each of us in a special way as we moved into the rest of the gathering.

I feel that because of the tone set that Friday evening, the entire weekend was more of a retreat than a conference. It was a true gathering; a gathering filled with stories, songs, and shared Franciscan spirit that reminded us that we not only belong to one another, but to the One who calls us together as family. May the Lord grant you peace.



Keynote Speaker: Dr. Darleen Pryds

9/11 Memorial

By Allison Salerno, OFS, Regional JPIC Animator

On the evening of Sept. 11 at ARG, I moderated a conversation between two people who had been in Manhattan on Sept. 11, 2001.

My husband, Greg Trevor, escaped Tower One of the World Trade Center 11 minutes before it fell. Carolyn Townes, OFS, was friends with Father Mychal Judge, OFM, a Franciscan friar who rushed into Tower One and died during the Tower's collapse as he was giving last rites to a firefighter.



Greg was working for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey on the 68th floor when the American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into Tower One 25 floors above him. He said he feels “humbled by the enormity of what we experienced” and grateful he survived. He discussed his friend and colleague, Port Authority Captain Kathy Mazza, “She is my guardian angel,” Greg said.

Captain Kathy died when Tower One collapsed. She and several colleagues were carrying a disabled woman in an evacuation chair out of the building. Greg said his brush with death deepened his faith. “We don’t understand it, but there is a plan.” It also made him appreciate the frailty of life.

“I tell myself every morning: every day is a gift and every breath is a blessing,” he said. “Sometimes I lean back and take in the air and think of how grateful I am and how blessed I feel.”

Carolyn said on Sept. 11 she was already in deep grief over the loss of her life partner, Raj, two weeks earlier. She told God she couldn’t handle the day. “And God said ‘yes you can.’ ” She made three phone calls: two to her partner’s cousins, urging them to evacuate the World Trade Center complex. The third call, she said, to Carol Ann LaPlante, OFS, went unanswered. Carol was working on the 97th floor of Tower One and likely died instantly when the plane hit. Carol worshiped with Carolyn at St. Francis of Assisi Church in midtown Manhattan, the same parish where Father Mychal lived.

Carolyn, who was a eucharistic minister at the parish, served at Father Mychal’s funeral amidst her deep grief. “I had to show up for Father Mychal. I have to serve for Father Mychal,” she said. “The Holy Spirit always has a purpose.”

Later, Carolyn became certified as a grief counselor and served from 2002 until she moved from New York in 2008 to the hundreds of people visiting St. Francis of Assisi Church, whether to mourn Father Mychal or their own losses. “This was God’s call for me all along,” she said. “I helped the bereaved. Very very few people want to journey with the bereaved because they think they can catch it.”

“Thank God I was there because it healed me too.”

Saturday celebration of the Eucharist
with Fr. Bill



Dessert with Fr. Bob at Berliner Kindl
Restaurant in Black Mountain



Friends from around the Region





Sunday Celebration of the Eucharist and Recognition of newly appointed Spiritual Assistants



Brian Ward, OFS; Brian Tierney, OFS; Charlie Comberrel, OFS; Dave Schick, OFS; Fr. Bob Menard, OFM

Music, Reflection, and the Easter of Saint Francis

By Dr. John Edgar-Reid, OFS

This year's Annual Regional Gathering offered Secular Franciscans a meaningful opportunity to reflect upon the 800th anniversary of the Easter of Saint Francis. Throughout the weekend we were reminded that Francis' passing was not an ending, but the beginning of a living legacy that continues to invite each of us to embrace the Gospel with simplicity, joy, and hope.

I was honored once again to provide the closing moments of Saturday evening through a time of meditative music and reflection. As the presentations came to an end, the music was offered simply as an opportunity to remain in prayer, allowing the words we had heard throughout the day to settle quietly within our hearts. Rather than concluding with activity, the gathering was invited into silence—a silence in which the Spirit often speaks most clearly.

The final selection came from my recently completed album, *When Trees Pray*. Its closing composition, "Begin Again, Begin Anew," was chosen intentionally because it reflects the heart of the conference theme. Eight hundred years after Francis entered eternal life, his invitation remains as compelling today as ever: each day is another opportunity to begin again, to renew our relationship with Christ, and to live the Gospel more faithfully.

For many years I have believed that meditative music can become another doorway into prayer, helping us carry the Gospel from fraternity gatherings into the quiet moments of daily life. Within our Franciscan tradition, deep, prayerful meditation can gently lead us toward contemplation, where we become more attentive to God's presence and more responsive to His grace. This reflects the spirit of the Secular Franciscan Rule 8, which reminds us that prayer and contemplation are the souls of all we are and do. It is my hope that these musical reflections provide a quiet place where hearts can listen, minds can become still, and God's gentle voice may be more easily heard.

Several brothers and sisters expressed an interest in hearing more of the music following the evening program. I am grateful for their encouragement and for the opportunity to share these reflections beyond the conference itself. If these compositions encourage even a few moments of deeper prayer, quiet meditation, or contemplative awareness of God's presence, then they have fulfilled the purpose for which they were created.

Those wishing to continue this journey of prayer through music may listen to *When Trees Pray* on Spotify, Apple Music, Amazon Music, YouTube Music, and other major streaming platforms. Additional information about the album and other contemplative recordings may be found at [WhenTreesPray.com](https://www.whentreespray.com).

May the Lord bless each of us as we continue to walk in the footsteps of Saint Francis, seeking Christ through prayer, contemplation, and joyful service.

Pax et Bonum.

Multicultural Commission

We enjoyed getting to know each other and sharing cultural information about our families, experiences, places we've lived, and our fraternities. We also discussed injustices in the nation as well as vulnerabilities within certain cultures that we should be sensitive to. While political topics can be polarizing and highly charged, the discussion of immigration and immigration enforcement in the U.S. was deeply grounded in our Franciscan identity and shows that we can talk about these things. Some ideas arose to help welcome interested persons from the Latino community and to overcome obstacles. Two ideas included having bilingual prayers at gatherings and retreats and considering the possibility of developing Spanish language cells for fraternities with Spanish speaking members. The idea of a cell was offered as a way to create a welcoming space where Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters can grow in fraternity, formation, and Franciscan vocation while remaining connected to and supported by the larger fraternity.



“Traveling with Jesus and Francis—Ecumenical Encounters”

“Working with Taylor and Michael at United Methodist Church in Durham, NC has enriched my sense of Christian community in bringing the gleaning bags to ARG. As in-resident partners with the Society of St. Andrew, from pickup to drop-off, I look forward to that relational encounter as we work together to bring farmers the necessary tools they need to do their work. These prepared gleaning bags ensure that the collected produce from farms across America are provided to the least among us so that they are nourished and fed. I love that my ability to assist with the logistics in this annual gleaning bag apostolate brings a Franciscan face to our Christian brothers and sisters across denominations.”

Submitted by Travis Bongiorno, OFS; Area 5 Councilor

Remembering Those Who Have Gone Before Us May They Rest in Peace

NAME	FRATERNITY
Dianne Ambrose, OFS	St. Elizabeth of Hungary, Augusta, GA
Richard Balogh, OFS	St. Elizabeth of Hungary, Augusta, GA
Helen Bell, OFS	St. Elizabeth of Hungary, Elizabeth City, NC
Bernard Bessette, OFS	St. Clare of Assisi, Aiken, SC
Audrey Binet, OFS	St. Elizabeth of Hungary, Augusta, GA
Nievelis Bittman, OFS	Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, Graham , NC
Rita Borst, OFS	Fraternity of Brother Francis, Newton, NC
Cathy Champon, OFS	St. Claire, Ashville, NC
Peake Andrew Dana, OFS	St. Francis of the Hills, Hendersonville, NC
Mary Claire Dempsey, OFS	St. Maximillian Kolbe, Charlotte, NC
Nancy Haizlip, OFS	Franciscan Martyrs of Siroki Brijeg, Blairsville, GA
Gail Halada, OFS	Padre Pio, Raleigh, NC
Ann Hammers, OFS	Channel of Peace, Chattanooga, TN
Linda Marie Keir, OFS	St. Thomas More, Wilmington, NC
Dennis Isoas Kissel, OFS	Fraternity of Stigmata of St. Francis, Johns Creek, GA
Constance Francis Moran, OFS	Fraternity of Stigmata of St. Francis, Johns Creek, GA
Barbara Lou Small, OFS	Fraternity of Stigmata of St. Francis, Johns Creek, GA
Mary Tocidlowski, OFS	St. Thomas More, Wilmington, NC

