

An Anglican at FI ***Averil Swanton TSSF***



It was with some surprise in October 2008 that I received a request from Richard Bird, the then Third Order Minister Provincial for the European Province, to allow my name to go forward as a candidate for membership of the Board of Directors for Franciscans International. Having given the request thought and prayer, I agreed to let my name and CV go forward. For months nothing seemed to happen and then in January 2009 I received a letter from Rome, from the Conference of the Franciscan Family, to say that I had been appointed. This was closely followed by e-mails of congratulations from all over the world, both from our own Tertiaries and First Order and from various Roman Catholic Franciscans. I was deeply touched by the excitement and pleasure that my appointment seemed to evoke and I was very mindful of the privilege of being the first Anglican member of the Board and a lay, secular woman to boot!

My first Board meeting took place in Geneva at the end of March 2009 and I was welcomed with great warmth and much talk of 'making history'. The days were long, starting with worship and sharing our faith stories at 8.30 and going on until 7.00 or 8.00 at night. The first day was given over to induction for the new members - seven of us in all - with three members of the old Board together with the three members continuing in office. We were given a brief history of Franciscans International; its relationship with the United Nations; its structure and the increased responsibility of the Conference of the Franciscan Family. This latter issue was given great emphasis since it is now agreed that this body has taken on board that the work for justice, peace and the environment is an essential part of the Franciscan charism and not just an optional extra, which requires more than just its blessing, but rather a whole-hearted commitment to further the aims and work of FI.

We were then given a briefing on the roles and responsibilities of the Board. I have certainly never been a part of so international a body. There are members from Singapore, Germany, Colombia, Mexico, Mauritius, Canada, North America, Ireland and the UK, covering all the main Franciscan Orders, including the Seculars and now SSF. We were introduced to the heads of departments from the Geneva office and informed about the work of the New York and Bangkok offices.

Over the course of the next day and a half we looked at the finances, including budget predictions, strategic planning, management by objectives, and review of each department's achievements and goals, together with an

up-date on the current issues which the advocacy department are pursuing at the United Nations. I had had the privilege on a previous visit of attending the meetings of the Council of Human Rights in Geneva and had seen for myself how FI works by lobbying the diplomats, arranging fringe meetings as well as bringing forward human rights issues from its vast experience at grassroots level. This kind of work does not have the immediate appeal of famine relief or frontline medical care; it takes immense patience to change the minds of governments, but the effects of tackling the abuse of human rights can be lifesaving in the literal sense and also in the vast improvement of living conditions.

Although the emphasis in the Geneva office is on human rights, in the New York office the current work emphasizes peace building and Christian/Muslim dialogue. In a recent development of the work of FI an office in Bangkok has been opened, in order to address among many other abuses, the terrible issue of people smuggling. Training sessions, advocacy workshops have been held and networks with others established in order better to tackle injustice. FI's Asia Pacific Programme's aim is to bring Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation specialists together, to inspire them to work together, to learn from each other and to understand how the FI offices can help them. As a result of one of these workshops Franciscans in Sri Lanka were made aware of FI's potential as an advocate of the rights of all those suffering in the ongoing conflict and in December FI responded to the request from local Franciscans to speak on behalf of those affected by the conflict in Sri Lanka. This was done through different human rights mechanisms within the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.' (2008 Annual Report of FI). This may not have captured the headlines in the western press, which was more concerned with the banking crisis, but it was an immense help to those who must have felt that no-one could hear their voice.

The enormous advantage that FI has is that it has Brothers and Sisters working all over the world with the most vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalised people, just as Francis himself did in Assisi.

For me the two and a half days of my first Board Meeting were life-affirming, with a lot of laughter and a deep level of sharing of our faith. Yes, FI and Franciscans in general are dealing with matters of serious and vital importance, but we lose something fundamental to our calling if we cannot laugh or share our joy. What pre-occupies me now is how we as Anglican Franciscans can both support and work with FI. We may not have the same number of grass-root Franciscans, but I would like to see greater co-operation and a genuine sharing with our Catholic Brothers and Sisters. Anglican Franciscans have already given their support to the Bangkok Office and I was delighted to learn that Br Clark Berge, Minister General of SSF, had visited the FI office in Geneva and had started discussions on how we can work together. Our first commitment must be one of prayer, but I would hope that we can commit to financial support both as an Order and as individuals. Whatever our denominational differences, as Franciscans we hold in common Francis' devotion to Christ and his active concern for the marginalised.

Whilst I was in Geneva, I went with others to visit the Red Cross Museum. It was a very moving and inspiring experience. The Red Cross came into being through the concern and vision of one man, Henri Dunant. When like many, I am sure, I feel overwhelmed by the injustices of the world and the futility of war I will try to remember just how much this one man achieved. From its inception FI was seen as ' the vehicle for the whole Franciscan Family to pursue the common goals of peace, care of creation and elimination of poverty.' By identifying with the work of Franciscans International we have the opportunity to do something really practical by sharing with our Brothers and Sisters in this work, and the vision of just one man, Francis. *f*