"Thou art the Man," cried Fr Winslow, as at that moment Algy Robertson, always late, walked into the room.' This quote is from an unpublished paper by Dorothy Swayne, who may be best described as the Founder of the Third Order. She and fellow Franciscan associates had grouped together during the late 1920's under an umbrella body, the Fellowship of the Way. They passionately hoped for the development of an Anglican Franciscan Order to which they might be attached as tertiaries.

Dorothy Swayne, at a time of spiritual crisis, had written to her friend, Deaconess Carol Graham, a missionary in India, for advice. Carol Graham was a member of the Third Order of Christa Seva Sangha, a Christian Ashram, started in 1920-22 by the Revd Jack Winslow, who hoped thereby to offer Christianity to India in an Indian rather than European guise. CSS had recently been reformed as a Franciscan Religious Order. Fr Algy Robertson, a First Order Brother of the Sangha, had been invalided out of India, and become Vicar of St Ives, Hunts. There he had founded a tiny English branch of CSS in his vicarage.

Meanwhile Jack Winslow was on furlough, and had been asked to attend a meeting of the Fellowship of the Way to advise the Franciscan associates in England. His finger pointed to Algy Robertson, the man for the task, and Algy willingly accepted the proposal to set up a Third Order, attached to his fragile, English, first Order branch of CSS. Shortly after, Father Algy and Dorothy Swayne met at her Club in Central London, where they adapted the Rule of CSS for the new Franciscan Third Order, which came into being in January 1931. The Principles, to which tertiaries turn every day in their prayers, had been written by Jack Winslow for CSS, and are still an important part of the Rule of the Society of St Francis.

It took another six years before the CSS in St Ives and BSFA (another small Franciscan Order) in Dorset finally agreed to a merger, and the Society of St Francis was formed. Thus, in 1937, TSSF, as we know it today, began its life, with Fr Algy, who had moved to Cerne Abbas (now Hilfield Friary) as Father Guardian and Dorothy Swayne as Assistant Guardian of the Third Order and Senior Novice Mistress.

The Third Order in its early days was very dependent on the First. The Guardian and Chaplain General were First Order priest friars. Tertiaries (as now) served six months as postulants and two years as novices before profession. Numbers rose steadily, by 1951 reaching a plateau of 300 plus. There was a high level of commitment to the Aims of the Order; Dorothy Swayne, the leading tertiary, who had lived in voluntary poverty while working alongside the poor of South London, was uncompromising about simplicity of life: 'Members of the Third Order shall strictly limit their personal expenditure
to such things as are necessary for the health and efficiency of themselves and those who are dependent on them.' (Early Days, 1953, p.5.)

Growth of the Third Order was restricted partly by the fact that new members were generally invited to join: for example, Hugh Beach, who was at Cambridge after war service, and became involved with SSF, was 'summoned to see Fr Algy,' whom he found in bed clutching a hot water bottle. 'In his threadbare little voice, he said, "We think it would be a good idea if you became a member of the Third Order." In a sense this struck me as another posting from a higher authority, so naturally I took up his suggestion.' (Memoir, 2003, p.58). Fr Algy's word was law; Dorothy Swayne writes: 'Fr Algy was particularly insistent on the importance of "hiddenness" for the Third Order, and for that reason any outward badge or habit, any publicity, any talking about the Third Order to all and sundry, was prohibited.' (Letter, 1962). Hiddenness was seen as an encouragement to humility in the religious life. Looking back, some tertiaries feel that during the early years, TSSF was like a secret society, but the intensity and obedience of that period must be remembered.

Fr Algy was also 'very insistent that we should not join together to run tertiary "good works",' continued Dorothy Swayne, (Ibid, 1962). Again the intention was 'hiddenness.' This remains general practice within the Order. Although most tertiaries in their separate lives are involved in prayer and works, there is reluctance among Third Order members to band together in social or political action on behalf of the poor - as First Order brothers have done from the start. (The classic example is of Br Douglas, the original Father Minister of SSF, in his work with wayfarers.)

The person probably most responsible for the growth of the Third Order was Br Edward SSF, who died only in 2010 at Alnmouth, and to whom tertiaries owe a huge debt of gratitude. In 1974, he was asked to become Guardian of the Third Order. Hugh Beach writes: 'It was an inspired choice.... He toured the land, constantly expanding the number of tertiaries by his talent for making friends. Under his rubric, the Order became the very opposite of reclusive.' (Talk, 1998). The membership in the European Province stands now at over 2000.

Br Edward also encouraged the Third Order to become more independent in its leadership: "He was successively Guardian, Chaplain General, Chaplain and finally Assistant Chaplain - a series of demotions which was the direct result of promoting tertiaries into all the positions held by friars." (Ibid, 1998). Edward stepped down in 1994, and was the last friar to hold office in the Third Order. This was seen as 'a virtue rising out of necessity,' and 'time for the Third Order to come of age.' (Platten, 2009). However, many tertiaries still owe their membership of the Order to the inspiration of First Order members.

In 1998/9, after the period of fast growth, the Provincial Chapter of TSSF felt it was time to review the organisation and formative processes within the Order. A questionnaire, sent out to all tertiaries, allowed feedback on these important issues. A report found: 'There is a tension between a vision of the Order as a
relatively minimal association of individuals, each personally exploring a pattern of discipleship, and a contrasting vision of a relatively strong community fellowship where much is shared and done in common.' (Shackley, 1998.) Consultants, (Sr Joyce CSF and the Ven Malcolm Grundy) worked with five teams of experienced tertiaries to produce a Final Report in 1999, with a new vision for the Order: "It would see the Order as a real community, but one committed to becoming non-hierarchical;" there would be cooperative, collaborative methods in making decisions. Proposals were made for a new structure. A very important recommendation was for "lifelong formation" from cradle to grave; the consultants recommended the formation of local groups: "a family-sized place where Franciscan spirituality can be discovered and shaped."

Over the last ten years, the new structures have been put into practice. Some tertiaries are not entirely reconciled to the new ethos, which emphasises working in community rather than as a collection of individuals. However, according to another questionnaire (2009), the majority of respondents felt that community building was very important. One tertiary wrote: "Community in the local sense means a given group of people with whom I try to work out what it means to be a Franciscan - a group with loving inter-dependence. In the wider sense it means belonging to an international order, which attempts to live with Franciscan ideals based on our Principles."