



How Can I Help?

Spotlight on: Franciscan Covenant Program

Inviting older adults into the volunteer family

By Alyssa Sickle, Executive Assistant and Events Coordinator

Franciscan Covenant Program is an inviting place to volunteers for more than just the Californian sunshine. With an average volunteer age of 59, the program is not your typical Catholic Volunteer Network member program. Franciscan Covenant Program offers volunteers a chance to serve in retreat centers and live alongside Franciscan friars. Read more about what draws volunteers to this program, and how you can invite an older generation of volunteers to serve with your program.

Franciscan Covenant Program is open to Catholic adults under the age of 67, and while inquiries from a younger crowd are welcome, recent college graduates are generally encouraged to consider one of the other Catholic Volunteer Network member programs. FCP also welcomes married couples to join the community, and generally have two to four couples serving with them each year. Paul Barnes and Phyllis Becker, directors of the Franciscan Covenant Program, have found that married couples bring stability to the program, making adjustments to community life easier.

Phyllis and Paul know that their potential volunteers are looking for a community where they can serve and grow spiritually. Volunteers serve in and around Californian Franciscan retreat centers in a variety of capacities, as their gifts and talents allow - carpentry, bookkeeping, health care, retreats, cooking, maintenance, hospitality, service to the poor, gardening and much more. Paul and Phyllis describe the unique aspect of their program as “a way to work with the poor in spirit, not just the marginalized poor. Not everyone is cut out to work with the poor,” they note. “A retreat atmosphere allows individuals to volunteer in a different volunteer atmosphere.”

Their volunteers live in community with Franciscan friars, giving them a close connection with the daily spiritual practices of the community. The volunteers usually arrive wanting personal spiritual enrichment. The simple lifestyle and spiritual directions from the friars is warmly embraced by the volunteers.

Phyllis and Paul recently asked current and former volunteers to respond to the question: “What about the Franciscan Covenant Program was inviting to you? Why were you interested in this program and not another?” The volunteers shared:

- I was drawn to the invitation to live, work, and pray with the friars.
- The FCP is designed to draw on the wisdom of older Catholics who have a life full of experience that they want to share. This appealed to us and challenged us to be able to

journey down a different path. Our one year of service became a desire to continue serving and walking with others as our lives and perspectives were transformed.

- I found the FCP “user friendly.” I was able to contact the directors and receive answers easily and in a timely manner. I also felt the program was well organized along every step of the application, interview, and acceptance process.
- Every moment of every day that we were in the program, which we truly loved, taught us so much about our faith and living close with others. I will always remember Br. Joachim giving us a retreat and he said the program was to enrich our lives and then send us back into the world to share. I pray that is still what we are doing.
- The FCP gave me the opportunity to live with the Friars and experience their lives, as well as doing work that would be of benefit to their activities.
- I chose the Covenant Program because it struck the right balance between community living and alone time, between liturgical prayer and opportunities for quiet reflection, and between real-world work experience and time away from a typical work environment.
- Living in the community with fertile spiritual ground on a daily basis gave such importance to taking it out into the world and spreading the fruit of the Spirit among us. I loved bringing the love and peace to the juvenile hall each week with the Friars. With the encouragement of the Friars, the creativity within was given various avenues to blossom. There was an incredible focus on harnessing the hindrances to the spiritual walk and an encouragement in manifesting God's grace in an individual freedom of life.

To programs considering welcoming older adults, Paul and Phyllis remind that professionalism and flexibility are very important to this generation.

“Inquiries thank us for our prompt response. Volunteers are ready to start the process at the time of inquiry. We believe our open ended application process allows for time tables of older adults who are searching for possibilities throughout the year, not just when they have completed their education.”

Since their program is closely connected with the lives of the friars, Phyllis and Paul make sure to communicate their mission and opportunities with the friars in the province. They advertise the program in provincial publications and attend regional Franciscan meetings to share their work. They also advertise in the classified section of the National Catholic Reporter and the Directory of Catholic Ministries.

While an inter-generational volunteer setting might not be possible for every program, the benefits of inviting volunteers of all ages into service can be beneficial to the volunteer program as well as the greater community.