A HISTORY OF FAITH AND LIGHT, U.S.A.   By Pearl Cahoon

Faith and Light had its beginning in the United States with a Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Lourdes, France, in 1971. Fr. Jim O'Donnell was asked by his friend, Jean Vanier of France, to invite a group of persons with disabilities, parents and friends to join the pilgrimage with Faith and Light friends in Canada. Among those from Cleveland were Julie and Mary Elizabeth Ryan, Virginia and Mary Ann O'Brien, Dorothy, Todd and Colette Gauchat, Sr. Charles, Marge Gibbons, Marilyn Cunin, Richard Kohn and his mother, Richard and Beth Conway, Rosemary and Judy Smith, Delores and Marie McKinley, and David McDonald accompanied by his father and two brothers. In preparation for the pilgrimage, they met at the Chapel in Catholic Center, Cleveland, Ohio to become acquainted before the journey. Upon arrival in France, Jean Vanier and Fr. Bill Clark warmly greeted them. It was a wonderful spiritual journey ending with a Fiesta and the exchange of candies and small gifts. After the pilgrimage, Fr. Gillis from Hamilton, Canada invited the pilgrims to a special reunion at. St. Anne's in Hamilton, Ontario.

In 1973 Bishop James A. Hickey asked Fr. Jim O'Donnell and Fr. Phil Pritt to plan to take persons with disabilities to Rome in 1975 to pilgrimage with Faith and Light members from all over the world. A committee was formed and Posie O'Connor and Anita McEvoy were asked to coordinate the pilgrimage. I was chosen by the committee to represent the United States at the international preparation meetings in Rome. Meeting the representatives of so many countries, speaking so many different languages was an exhilarating experience. This was in the early days of Faith and Light before they were equipped with special radio headphones used for interpreting. Fr. Hvied of Helsingor, Denmark, was assigned to sit beside me and quietly translate while I put his words into shorthand. These meetings were intense and went from early morning into evening sessions. It happened about the third day that everyone broke into laughter and Fr. Hvied and I stopped. Jean Vanier, being very sensitive as to how exhausting this is for translators, pointed out to the members that he had switched to English and Fr. Hvied and I were so tired that we hadn't noticed. We joined in the laughter when we realized we were unconsciously treating the English language as one that needed translated for me.

Fr. Jim and Fr. Phil Pritt chartered two airplanes without knowing whether anyone would be interested. At departure time there were 410 pilgrims signed up and others who were disappointed because we had no openings. What better example of FAITH than to charter two planes and pray that people might be interested. Fr. Jim began a fund-raising campaign to assist families as well as to take individuals living in institutions on the pilgrimage. The campaign was successful. It was heartwarming to know individuals living in institutions would experience, not only their first airplane ride, but would have a never to be forgotten spiritual journey. The memories they would take back to the institution would warm and brighten their loneliest hours.

Fr. George Matejka and Fr. Ted Weiss were stationed in Rome at that time and were very helpful in making arrangements there. The Mass at North American College was one of the highlights of the Pilgrimage. The preparations were completed and we arrived in Rome and were greeted by Jean Vanier who helped with the myriads of luggage. Jean would drop the luggage to hug a friend he recognized.

0n Sunday the Pilgrims gathered for Mass at St. Peter's and at that time some handicapped pilgrims presented scrolls to Cardinal Poletti. After Mass, Pope Paul went among the pilgrims and talked with and blessed many of those in wheelchairs and showed much compassion for our brothers and sisters with handicaps. At the Torch Light Vigil in St. Peter's Square, he addressed the pilgrims from his window:

 When our plane landed in Cleveland, Fr. Phil boarded the plane and called me to the front to tell me my son Ken, 31, had suffered a fatal heart attack the night before and he led me to my family who were sadly awaiting my return. I hesitate to mention this sorrow in my life and yet I feel it is important to share it with you. I loved my son who was a wonderful husband to Elaine and father to his two little girls, Chris 9 and Connie 5. If anyone told me I could continue to work in Faith and Light or the Apostolate after losing my son, I would have said, "impossible". I share this part of my personal experience only to stress the power of prayer. The 410 pilgrims remained on the plane when Fr. Jim announced what happened and they prayed for my family. Many cancelled their flights to other states to come to the funeral home the next evening. lnstead of falling apart, I had unbelievable strength and peace to do what had to be done. Through the years I have witnessed other Faith and Light families in times of serious illness or deaths and I have seen the power of prayer miraculously give them strength and acceptance -- with acceptance comes Peace!

You have a special place in the Church, where your simple faith, your prayer, the appeal for affection in your eyes, your generous heart, all remind Christians of the only ways which lead to God. You have a place in society where, thank God, you have many friends who love you and support you, and remember that they too depend on you.

Jean Vanier asked us to return home to form small communities of people. Posie and I with friends would call the people together for a Celebration and 150 to 200 pilgrims who had been to Lourdes came together with their albums and memorabilia; friendships were forming at this time, but communities were not! In the meantime at the request of International Faith and Light in France, we disseminated information to people through the United States and kept them interested in Faith and Light. These were seeds that were being planted, which would later bear fruit. In those days the literature came in French and had to be translated before we could type and xerox it for distribution. Today, everything comes in English and is beautifully printed.

In January 1977, Fr. Krasen, Posie and I went to a meeting in Chicoutimi, Canada with plenty of warm clothing. The Faith and Light meeting was well represented by people from Quebec, Newfoundland, Montreal, Toronto and the United States. Irene from Trosley, France was on hand to represent Jean Vanier. The people in wheelchairs gave us a picture they had drawn with a card attached giving the name, address and birthday of a person with a handicap. This was to encourage the recipient to respond with a birthday greeting and hopefully develop a friendship with the person. Neat idea! In 1978 the news came from International that another Pilgrimage to Lourdes was being planned for 1981. What would be different from the Rome Pilgrimage was that it would not be “x” number of strangers boarding the plane, but it would be open only to members of Faith and Light communities.

This was the magic that was needed. When this information went out, small communities began to form. Posie O'Connor with the Oden family were first to call people together at Oden's home, followed with Julie Ryan, the Murphy's, Virginia O'Brien, LaBianca's, the Nose family, the Thomas' in Akron as well as communities in Wadsworth and Dayton. Not necessarily in that order, but in the same time frame, and all in Ohio . At the same time, communities were beginning to form through the efforts of Sr. Joan Magnani, Fr. Bob Wagner, Barbara Stevens, and, Sr. Pat Murphy in Massachusetts. In Connecticut, Kay Maloney and the Peterson's helped form the first community.  In Jefferson, Wisconsin, Sr. Jeanne d'Arc started a community at St. Coletta Church. In California, Betty Britchgi (Diocese of San Diego)and Judi Garcia (St Rose of Lima, San Diego) helped start the first community. In Washington state, Sr. Mary Hurley, William Wightman, Adolph Meisch, and Danny and Teres Millar started communities. Later, Mark and Loretta Miller started a community in Witchita, Kansas. Again the communities were formed about the same time, but not necessarily in that order.

In January 1978, Terry Gaydosh and her brother, Frank and I represented the United States at the Faith and Light Conference at Brussels, Belgium. Marie-Helene Mathieu was elected President of Faith and Light, giving Jean Vanier an opportunity to resign from the administrative work and to be free to travel and be more present to people. Betty Renaud of Canada was elected Coordinator of our Zone, the U.S. and Canada. After the Conference, we took a train to Trosley to visit with friends. The L'Arche homes in Trosley are located in a unique village with stone houses and narrow, hilly roads and dirt sidewalks. Jean Vanier started l'Arche with just two men many years ago and the village has hundreds of handicapped people living in homes through the village. L’Arche has spread throughout the world as a result of one man who believed people with developmental disabilities could live in harmony and enjoy richer lives by living in community. I really enjoyed sharing meals at these homes in such a peaceful and happy atmosphere and then watching everyone "pitch in" for the cleanup. In their simplicity, this community has truly found the secret of living amicably in community. That is not to say there are never problems, but when a person has anxieties, he is never alone ... he has his brothers and sisters to console him, just as they share their prayer, their meals, their leisure and their lives together.

The preparations for the 1981 Pilgrimage to Lourdes continued. Posie and I attended a meeting in Cork, Ireland in January 1979. Representatives of 17 countries were present, and leaders of Faith and Light stressed the importance of coming together in community at least once a month in preparation for a Pilgrimage to Lourdes in 1981. In Cleveland, a “Core Group” met regularly at Fr. Jim O’Donnell’s home for the 1981 Pilgrimage. Some of the people who came from out of state to join the Core Group were Kay Maloney and Fr. Cal Gengras from Connecticut, Fr. Bob Wagner from MA, and Sr. Paschal Nurre and Sr. Teresita from Iowa. Some of the Clevelanders were Terry Jungquist, Sandy Gross, Brian Daw, Dorothy Michaels, Ann Daw, Marge Gibbons, Fr. George Matejka, Pearl Cahoon, Eric Gauchat, Posie 0'Connor and Henry Oden. When the time of the Pilgrimage to Lourdes came, we were well prepared and had a wonderful experience of community, prayer and love.

In the early 1980s, Faith and Light was growing and some structure was necessary. A National Coordinator and National team were discerned in 1983. The first National Coordinators in order were myself from Cleveland, Ohio, Fr. Cal Gengras, from Hartford, CT, Brian Daw from Cleveland, Ohio; Maureen O'Reilly from Dearborn, Michigan and Barbara Stevens from Wellsfleet, MA. In my first years as National Coordinator, there were no communities. My term was spent in communication, writing letters, sending out materials and talking about Faith and Light to interested groups. That was followed with 17 years as National Secretary and 18 years publishing the National Newsletter.

Fr. Cal Gengras brought his gentleness, and was able to interest many people throughout the States when he talked at a NAMR Conference about Faith and Light. His term was cut short due to the serious illness of both of his parents. Brian Daw was discerned Coordinator at a time when his special talents and expertise were needed. Brian was instrumental in incorporating Faith and Light as a non-profit with the IRS in April 27,1983. Once Faith and Light was given non-profit status, we applied and were awarded an annual grant from the American Bishops Catholic Mission. Under Brian’s leadership, we also began the National Newsletter and divided Faith and Light USA into regions.

Maureen O'Reilly was discerned as National Coordinator in 1986, and brought with her a quiet prayerfulness and the ability to make each person feel important. Maureen's term wasn't finished when she was discerned as International Co-Coordinator. It was a big challenge, but she managed it thanks to her many gifts and her great sense of humor. Barbara Stevens was discerned National Coordinator in place of Maureen in 1989. She brought to the role, a deep sensitivity and understanding gained from personal experience. Her genuine honesty in expressing the love received from her son Paul, as well as her wisdom in relating some of the problems of parents, endeared her to all Faith and Light members. Barbara was unable to complete her term in order to care for her husband, Bob.

In 1994, the International Faith and Light council members recommended in view of the growth of communities in the USA, that our nation should split into two provinces. The partition was approved by the International Council in Poland in July 1994, and then at the Denver meeting in the fall of 1994, members voted to restructure into two parts USA East and USA West, taking the Mississippi River as the boundary. Sr. Florita Rodman, was discerned as the Provincial Coordinator for USA EAST. John and Diane Griffin were discerned as Provincial Coordinators for USA WEST.

Regarding the service post of National Treasurer, our first Treasurer was Eric Gauchat . He was followed by Posie O'Connor, the late Salvatore LaBianca, John O'Reilly, Claire Butler, Fred Seagren and Al …..check the current

Our National Chaplains have been Fr. Jim O'Donnell, Fr. Bob Wagner, Fr. Cal Gengras, Fr. George Matejka, and Fr. Jim Boyle. After the split into two provinces, the Provincial Chaplains for the USA East have been Fr. Giles LeVasseur, Father Bob Malloy and Father John Welch. The Provincial Chaplains of Faith and Light USA West have been Deacon Mike Ciletti, of Colorado Springs, CO, and Sister Ursula Fotovich, CSJ.

Through the years Faith and Light communities have been blessed to have so many ministers, priests, religious, and bishops involved in their communities in the various locales. Each, in his/her own way, have made valuable contributions to the spirituality of Faith and Light through the years. We must keep in mind that leaders in Faith and Light are chosen through the discernment process and that involves a lot of prayer. Once again, the power of prayer has blessed us with inspirational leaders in Faith and Light.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the gratitude we owe the Diocese of Cleveland and the Apostolate in those early days. There was very little money coming in. I was able to use the facilities at my work and inform people through the Apostolate newsletter "Communique". I was able to use their equipment to get information out, and was given time to travel around the country to speak about Faith and Light. Thanks to Bishops James Hickey and Anthony Pilla, and the Apostolate Directors, Fr. Phil Pritt and Griff Hogan for the important role they played in planting seeds of Faith and Light in the United States.

I have touched on some history of Faith and Light, but volumes could be written about the hundreds of members whose efforts and dedication have contributed to the growth of Faith and Light USA, as well as the friendships and joys that members have experienced along the way. It is important to remember that the strength and rationale for Faith and Light lies in the small communities who come together in friendship to nurture, support and celebrate one another. The many blessings we have received are evidence that we are being guided by the Holy Spirit. Let us continue to pray for one another in the International family of Faith and Light.

Collection of names for a Faith and Light USA history

**National Coordinators in order:**

**Pearl Cahoon**

Rev. Cal Gengras,

Brian Daw,

Maureen O’Reilly,

Barbara Stevens

After 1994

USA East:

Sister Florita Rodman

Bill and Debbie Cramsie

Dolores Wilson and Fred Seagren

Maggie Demco

USA West:

John and Diane Griffin

­­­­Ron and Lourdes Landry

Jerilynn Ciletti

Eileen Hermes

Michael Brault

**National Treasurer:**

Eric Gauchat

Posie O'Connor

Salvatore LaBianca,

John O'Reilly,

Claire Butler,

USA East:

Fred Seagren

Al Collassi

USA West:

Edie Loughmiller

**National Chaplains:**

Fr. Jim O'Donnell,

Fr. Bob Wagner,

Fr. Cal Gengras,

Fr. George Matejka

Fr. Jim Boyle.

After 1994

Provincial Chaplains for the USA East:

Fr. Giles LeVasseur,

Father Bob Malloy and

Father John Welch.

Provincial Chaplains of Faith and Light USA West:

Deacon Mike Ciletti, of Colorado Springs, CO, and

Sister Ursula Fotovich, CSJ