

Final Communiqué

Renewing Our Common Vision as Lay Friars in a Fractured World: Franciscan Contemplatives Formed for Pastoral Ministry and Evangelisation

SAAOC Lay Friars Meeting, 13-17 May 2024

Introduction: A Word of Welcome and Orientation

The meeting began with words of welcome and an orientation by Friar Vernon Chua, from the Custody of St Anthony, our hosts.¹ The meeting of the lay friars was held at La Salle House, a retreat centre in Singapore operated by the Brothers of the Christian Schools (FSC), the De La Salle Brothers.

In his short address, Vernon noted the decision of the 2021 General Chapter, when it resolved that each conference or continent of the Order would hold meetings of lay brothers as a preparatory phase for an international meeting of Franciscan lay brothers to be held in May 2025.

The General Chapter asked that we consider ways to “forge paths with regard to contemplation, formation, and pastoral and evangelisation initiatives” so we can indicate to the whole Order “new ways of expressing our charism.”² Vernon noted that we have a significant task ahead of us, at this meeting and at the international conference to follow.

During these days, we followed the pathway set forth by the Chapter Decision.³ We focused first on our vocation as contemplatives: prayerful friars minor, in fraternity, with a clear mission to spread the Gospel. We then focused on formation as a critical pathway in our vocation as friars minor in fraternity and for mission. Finally, we focused on pastoral and evangelisation initiatives as friars minor in fraternity.

In each of these areas, we focused on the question, “What does the charism of the Franciscan lay friar bring to the journey to be ‘Contemplatives Formed for Pastoral Ministry and Evangelisation?’” which was our theme of the gathering.

At the beginning of each day, one of the friars gave a presentation on one of the three mandated themes:

- **Friar Michael Goh** (Custody of St Anthony, Malaysia-Singapore) on contemplation in the life of friars
- **Friar Charles Bernard** (Province of St Thomas, India) on formation
- **Friar David Leary** (Province of the Holy Spirit, Australia-New Zealand) on pastoral ministry and evangelisation.

¹ Friar Derrick Yap also provided warm words of welcome and direction to the friars gathered. See, Derrick Yap, “Letter to Brothers gathered at the SAAOC Lay Brothers' Meeting,” (Singapore: Order of Friars Minor, Custody of St Anthony, 13 May 2024).

² General Chapter, Responding to the Invitation of the Holy Spirit as Lesser Brothers in the Church and World: Final Document of the General Chapter 2021, Decision 2 (Rome: Order of Friars Minor, 2021).

³ Ibid.

Our task was to interact with these presentations, find similarities and differences within our own entities, enter into deep dialogue across our conference, and present to the whole Order our thoughts and ideas on these three themes: contemplation, formation, pastoral ministry and evangelisation.

At the end of the week, we had two important tasks. The first was to produce a final communique. The second was to elect four friars to attend the international convocation of Franciscan Lay Friars in 2025. So let us begin!⁴

Contemplation in the Life of the Franciscan Lay Brothers

Friar Michael Goh, of the Custody of St Anthony (Malaysia, Singapore), presented **Talk One** and began with a reflection on what inspired him first to join the Franciscans and later to discern his vocation as a lay friar. Michael reflected on some key historical realities of the friars minor, specifically, that lay friars in decades past were seen as a form of second-class religious because they had decided not to be ordained.

The assembled friars acknowledged this historical reality within many, if not all, the entities of the Order while also noting that this was, by and large, no longer the case within SAAOC. Over the three days of the meeting, several friars recalled their experience of discrimination by ordained friars, both in the friaries and the ministries to which they were assigned. These recollections caused the friars to express sorrow at the hurt caused by acts of discrimination.

The friars remain committed to exploring the uniqueness of a form of Franciscan religious life that encapsulates great diversity in the way that minority, fraternity, and mission are lived. The true reality, depth, and richness of our Franciscan charism, life, and ministry across the globe would be diminished if lay friars were not at the centre of our minority, fraternal life, and our mission.⁵ We noted the uniqueness, and even the radicality, of this form of life within the Franciscan world and how the call to be lay friars carries with it the opportunity for a humble expression of minority and fraternity.

The first presentation also gave some consideration to the experience and role of being “mother” to the friars. We acknowledged this to be an important characterisation of service, and a term used by Francis in his letter to Brother Leo and in the Rule for Hermitages.⁶ The role of “mothering”, or service to the friars within their home, is imperative to the life of our fraternity. In past times, lay friars may have been assigned the tasks of cooks and cleaners, keeping house and sustaining life at home. It is clear to us that this role of service to the friars in building up

⁴ "Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up until now we have done little or nothing" from Thomas of Celano, "The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi by Thomas of Celano (1228-1229)," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents - The Saint*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellman, and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1999), p. 273.

⁵ In speaking of the vocation of the Franciscan Lay Brother, and in his letter to the SAAOC meeting, Brother Massimo Fusarelli said that we “cannot let it die and for this we need to present our vocation in its originality and completeness. If the lay brothers become very few or even die out, the provincial fraternities would lack an essential element of the charism.” Massimo Fusarelli, "Letter to the SAAOC Lay Brothers' Meeting," (Rome: Ordo Fratrum Minorum, 14 May 2024), p. 1.

⁶ See, Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellman, and William J. Short, eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents - The Saint*, 4 vols., vol. 1 (New York: New City Press, 1999).

and sustaining life at home is the right and responsibility of all friars. This creative and essential role can never be seen as a lesser ministry apportioned to lay friars because they are lay, even worse, because they lack the capacity to engage in other forms of ministry. We affirm that hospitality is the role and responsibility of **all** friars.

The friars spoke at length about the differences between the lay and ordained friars minor. In considering differences, there is always the risk that one or other of the comparison points ends up as less than the other. This was not the conclusion we reached in our discussions. We considered the differences, but we nonetheless affirmed the common life we share and seek to continue as equals.

We are one in our sense of fraternity. We are one in our desire to live the Gospel and “to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the *peripheries* in need of the light of the Gospel.”⁷ We are one in our spirituality. We are one in our commitment to being contemplative men, friars minor, seeking to engage fruitfully in the pastoral mission of evangelisation.

We affirmed our common conviction that we entered the Order of Friars Minor, first and foremost, to be friars minor rather than to seek a particular role. We chose the life of a lay friar as it is, for us, the best and most fruitful expression of our vocational call.

We also noted that there are several critical points where education is required so that those we encounter understand fully the life of the lay friar.

Parishioners in our parishes often do not understand the significance of the lay friar in the life and history of the Order. We feel frustrated when those we encounter ask, “When will you be ordained?” or “Why haven’t you gone all the way with your vocation?”

Perhaps more troubling is where ordained friars seem unable to understand the beauty and significance of the vocational call to be a lay friar. In both cases—with lay people we encounter and ordained friars with whom we live—rather than dwell on the deficiencies in understanding, we commit ourselves to an educational process that assists those we encounter to understand the sacred call to which we have responded—to be a lay friar minor.

Reflections on Fraternal Life

In our discussion on the differences between lay and ordained friars minor, we also focused our attention on the presence and absence of our brothers in community. We acknowledge that friars—both lay and cleric—can be absorbed into ministry and lose sight of the need for balance in the way we express our identity as friars minor in fraternity and for mission.

This led us to ask the question that must be answered by all friars: “Where do we place our priorities?” The stark conclusion we affirm is that our fraternal experience has no life unless individual friars make a commitment to participate in the daily life of the fraternity: prayer, home life, hospitality, fraternal gathering and support, availability, presence and sharing in the tasks that make a house into a home.

⁷ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 24 November, 2013), n. 20.

We reflected on why for some friars, engagement in ministry takes priority over all other aspects of life. We understand that ministry provides a sense of fulfilment in life, but we affirm that this can be a choice that becomes a trap as it can diminish the experience of fraternity and threaten the vocational life of the individual and the life of the fraternity.

We therefore pose these questions:

1. We train our men for ministry, but do we provide training and support to enable communities to function well?
2. Do we assist the friars to gain the skills necessary for making relationships work?
3. Do we help friars learn the practical aspects of fraternal love, the resolution of conflicts, and the reparative actions required to make fraternal relationships work?
4. Do we mentor friars so that they can discern and acknowledge when ministry becomes personal property, a form of escapism, or a retreat from fraternal life to avoid conflict and accountability?

We acknowledge that our human formation as friars minor is lacking. We understand that we require forms of assistance that may be provided by the psychological sciences and those who teach and practice psychology. Our experience of formation does not sufficiently focus on gaining the knowledge and skills to make relationships work, both inside and outside the fraternity. We call for action in this area.

Why we became Lay Friars

During the days together, we engaged in a fruitful and supportive dialogue about the vocational call to which we have responded generously: to be lay friars minor.

Some friars spoke of an initial response and then a secondary choice, which contained greater depth, a more gracious understanding of the self, and a more realistic assessment of personal capacity. For some friars, choosing to be a lay friar initially appeared as the only possible direction in response to feeling unworthy or inadequate. This sense of inferiority was internally experienced but sometimes externally affirmed by formators and decision-makers within the Order.

In all such cases, a later and more in-depth discernment affirmed personal worth, and the sacred worth of being a lay friar minor.

For other friars, the choice to be lay friars was affirmed from the very beginning through contact with holy, welcoming, and kind friars, good mentors, and the positive desire to lead a humble and simple life of service.

Still, others assessed during the earliest stages that a lay friar minor had greater freedom of choice and, as one friar phrased it, an opportunity to “do more than a priest.”

There were painful expressions of loss and rejection by some friars as they recounted experiences of not being affirmed in the discernment of their vocational path.

Beyond the concept of gaining freedom to choose a pastoral ministry direction, a number of friars expressed their experience of being inspired by those at the margins of society and of the resultant clear desire to lead a life committed to relieving the suffering of others.

In many of the stories recounted, the example of good and kind friars and their humble expression of being a friar influenced the discernment process. In all the stories, the key desire was to serve the People of God and the fraternity in the most authentic manner possible.

The discussion on the vocational call, and the vocational decisions we made, led to a rich discussion on day two on the formation of friars.

Thoughts and Ideas about Formation

Friar Charles Bernard, who is the secretary for formation and studies for SAAOC, presented on formation at the beginning of Day Two. He began by noting the sacred task that is formation, because formators “touch the hearts” of the candidates.

Of the 12,127 friars worldwide (in 2022), the vast majority were ordained friars, with only 1633 lay friars at last count. The diminishing number of lay friars is a concerning trend, as their decline diminishes the character of the Order, a point also noted by the Minister General in his letter to the meeting participants of our gathering.⁸

It was noted during the presentation that there is too often confusion regarding the role of the lay friar, that there is no emphasis in the Ratio on formation and studies on the specific needs of lay friars, and that this confusion and deficit in formation are causal in candidates choosing not to be lay friars.

There is a clear demand within key sectors of the Order to de-clericalise the fraternity. Since the time of Giacomo Bini (a renowned past Minister General), pressure has been applied on the relevant Vatican dicasteries to allow lay friars to participate equally in governance within the Order, but more is required.

There was a valuable discussion on how we see ourselves and how we identify and name ourselves, within and outside the Order. For all Franciscans, being known simply and clearly as “friars” emphasises the centrality of brotherhood and inclusion in the Order, rather than a specific role oriented towards ministry. A change of name, though symbolic in some ways, can also begin a necessary change in culture, which can produce a change in how we live and minister.

A stronger emphasis in formation on internalising the Franciscan charism rather than on role (through theological or professional training) could provide a deeper grounding for life in the fraternity. This requires the Order to place a greater emphasis on skilled and trained accompaniment of friars throughout and after their initial formation. It was noted with concern that training for formators has been ad hoc and not always emphasised as a prerequisite for formators, and that training for those who mentor and accompany friars is virtually non-existent.

⁸ Fusarelli, "Letter to the SAAOC Lay Brothers' Meeting."

During the open discussion, we became aware of the diversity within SAAOC in how the various Ratio are implemented, how the choice of vocational pathway is made, and when the choice is made. We also became aware of the diversity within SAAOC in relation to the professional training pathways that are chosen and that receive support: nursing, teaching, counselling, social work, lecturing, formation, leadership, and governance of ministry and entities. This diversity provides a clear picture of the breadth and depth of engagement that lay friars have in their entities and beyond.

Pastoral Ministry and Evangelisation

Friar David Leary presented Talk Three on the morning of Day Three of the SAAOC meeting of lay friars. He noted the importance of the interaction between the friar's internal emotional and spiritual world—what they carry in their person and their history—and the Gospel, as the starting point of our life and ministry.

It was noted that if we avoid facing and embracing who we really are—our true self—then we will struggle to find the abiding presence of God within, and we will struggle to be open to the “other”, the person we meet in ministry who is necessarily different and foreign to us.

The presentation on Pastoral Ministry and Evangelisation focused on the importance of story. It noted that narrative or story is at the core of the Gospel encounters, and that story is at the core of our encounters within our fraternity and beyond. The encounter with the “other” requires of us that we know and accept ourselves so that we can be open to the foreignness of those we meet.

We must therefore focus on and exercise two critical lungs in Franciscan Pastoral Ministry and Evangelisation. That:

- We listen with the heart to what is really happening for people. This requires of us that we use all our senses, that we are patient, capable of waiting in silence, and being prepared to learn as well as give.
- We commit our ministry to freeing others from their personal prison experience, whatever that may be.⁹

Both of these imperatives require a capacity for fidelity in relationship, a commitment to being with and present to others—even in times of struggle and sadness—and that pastoral relationships become a contemplative and freeing encounter for those we touch.

This type of Franciscan encounter is not without uncertainty and risk. What we are doing and how we are engaged in such ministry may not be understood by those within the fraternity or those beyond the friars minor. But going to the margins, and being with those who are rarely understood, is a clear and present Franciscan commitment. The driving question in our ministry as lay friars must always be, “What more can we do?”

⁹ See Luke 4:18

The presentation concluded with recommendations on how we need to proceed as lay friars in order to develop the capacity to be with others, the *stranger and the alien*¹⁰, listen with the heart, and create moments where freedom becomes possible. This begins with appropriate training that heightens our personal awareness of how God moves within us, in our personal histories and in our present-day experiences. Such training also aims to enhance our skills of accompaniment with friars and with others.

The discussion that followed the presentation continued to focus on how the life and work of the lay friar is often hidden and certainly less visible than the ministry of an ordained friar. What is our response to this hiddenness, and how can we speak of the work we do, and share our stories in a humble but nonetheless forthright manner? Telling our story as lay friars minor is an important element of our evangelisation, expressing the beauty of this life for the sake of those we encounter.

In this discussion on life in fraternity and ministry, there was a certain sadness that those with authority at times do not recognise lay friars, and so the absence of effective collaboration is concerning. That said, there was significant joy expressed within the assembly at the experience of facilitated listening to each other and the opportunity to share our stories of life and ministry.

The friars again reminded themselves that striking the right balance between fraternal life and ministry is imperative for an enriched experience of being friars minor. Seeking this balance helps us to avoid isolation, creeping individualism, and an overemphasis on work. Life inside and outside the fraternity need to complement each other.

There were a few moments during our days together when we spoke of how the ordained friars become overwhelmed with the demands of ministry. This can also happen for lay friars. What needs to be recognised is that friars make choices. They are not powerless; they are not puppets in ministry. They are not passively drawn into overwork. They make choices regarding the extent of their pastoral engagement, and they make choices regarding their engagement in the life of the fraternity. In that sense, we too, as friars minor, need to be evangelised in order to maintain our authenticity and fidelity as friars minor.

We completed day three with a brainstorming exercise focusing on what is imperative in our understanding of pastoral ministry and evangelisation within the context of fraternal life. Our focus needs to be on:

- Acknowledging with humility and joy the work that we do.
- Being prepared to tell our story so that the life of the lay friar is understood and appreciated.
- Having more experiences of facilitated listening and open sharing with each other to deepen our understanding of our common life.
- Reflecting on the heart of my choice to be a friar minor.

¹⁰ See Deuteronomy 10:19; Matthew 25:38.

- Critical reflection on how I live my life as a friar minor.
- Critical reflection on who I am becoming in my “doing”.
- Developing and sustaining collaborative ministry.
- Strengthening communication between friars in life and ministry settings so that trust in each other can be established, sustained, and enhanced.
- Increasing the number of lay friars who are skilled and engaged in formation at all stages of initial and ongoing formation.
- Encouraging our governance that regardless of how you live as a friar (lay or ordained), our governance needs to focus on the “right man for the right place at the right time”.
- Friars being honest and authentic when considering our abilities, avoiding false humility but also hubris.

Election of the Four Delegates to the International Conference of Lay Friars

An election was held on the final day of the meeting of lay friar. The election was presided over by the SAAOC Secretary for Formation and Studies. Four ballots were held, one for each of the four delegates to be elected. The results of the

Friar David Leary, Province of the Holy Spirit, Australia and New Zealand

Friar Thomas Thekkal John, Province of St Thomas, India

Friar Titus Angga Restuaji, Province of St Michael the Archangel, Indonesia

Friar Vernon Chua, Custody of St. Anthony, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei

Evaluation of the Meeting and Process

Prior to the conclusion of the meetings, the friars were invited to reflect on and critique the meeting and to make suggestions on how to improve the meeting process.

The friars were unanimous in their appreciation of the organising committee, the Custody of St Anthony, our generous and gracious hosts. A repeated comment was that the friars from other entities were made to feel at home in the Custody, which is a wonderful tribute to all the friars of the Custody and to their Custos, Friar Derrick Yap, who opened their hearts and welcomed us all.

Friars Titus Angga Restuaji and Stanislaus Sukartanto were also thanked for their generous and faithful translation of presentations, questions, and responses from English into Bahasa.

The friars commented on the simplicity of the meeting arrangements and the careful use of electronic communication rather than hard-copy documents, an important strategy in our efforts to care for the earth.

There was general agreement that the meeting should not be a single event and should occur more often; however, there was also a request for better forward communication about themes

and speaking requirements, as this would assist in achieving a more focused set of talks and reflections.

A significant final comment was made about how the friars related to each other during the meeting. Our relating was warm, with a fraternal heart, where everyone was encouraged to have a voice and to offer their thoughts and ideas. No one was excluded, and no one dominated. It was our life as friars minor in action!

Concluding Comments

This was a positive event and one that should be repeated. Providing friars with the opportunity to share stories and experiences—both positive and negative—is an enriching experience. When we talk, and when we share, and when we listen intently, we learn and we enliven the life of the friars minor.

Language differences were a challenge, but not insurmountable, and this was a credit to the friars who helped bridge the gaps in understanding. We discovered in this encounter over four days that we friar minors from different entities across Asia and Oceania have much in common. We share common dreams and common disappointments. We share common sadness and common joys. We are enriched in each other's presence, and we discovered anew, as our father Francis did, that "the Lord gave me some brothers"¹¹ and that this is good!

Approbation

The lay friars assembled in Singapore for the SAAOC Lay Friars Meeting, held from 13 to 17 May 2024, unanimously approved this Final Communiqué.

Dated: 17 May 2024

END

¹¹ Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone, "The Testament," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents - The Saint*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellman, and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1999), p. 125.

Appendix One:

Recommendations

The lay friars assembled recommend that:

1. Each entity determines a clear schema for the formation of Franciscan Lay Friars that forms discrete chapters in key revised documents: the Franciscan Ratio Formationis and Ratio Studiorum.
2. Such schemas be reviewed and revised regularly, taking into account the needs of the entity, the *signs of the times*,^{12 13} and the particular context of those presenting as candidates for life and ministry as friars minor.
3. Formation and study documents be practical and concentrate on the question of “how” the guidelines will be implemented.
4. Processes of education for lay people, those we encounter, and ordained friars minor on the sacred vocational call to be lay friars minor.
5. The Order moves towards identifying both lay and ordained Franciscans as “friar” (Fra).

Explanatory Note: The rationale for this suggestion is to remove the distinction between those who are ordained and those who are not.

6. Formation focus in a more deliberate and sustained manner on the psychology of human relationships, the development of respectful fraternal bonds and on pastoral relationships, the resolution of conflict, and the acquiring of skills to make friendships and relationships work better.

Explanatory Note: This area of formation is lacking and needs urgent improvement if we are to sustain our fraternities as creative and loving environments to which friars desire to return each day after ministry.

7. To effect this type of change to formation, we need to look beyond our internal capacities and explore how professionals outside of the Order can help improve the quality of our formation process, especially as it applies to human formation.
8. Formation of formators and those who accompany friars during initial formation and beyond is lacking and inadequate and must be urgently remedied.
9. It is critical to focus on training those who mentor and accompany friars in this area of formation, with this training being intellectual, technical, and experiential, so that those who accompany friars are more personally insightful, more closely attuned to the issues

¹² This phrase was first used by Pope John XXIII in his Apostolic Constitution *Humanae Salutis* of 25 December 1961 in which he convoked the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. See also Matthew 16:4 where Jesus chides the Sadducees for their inability to “interpret the signs of the times.”

¹³ *Gaudium et Spes* was one aspect of the Vatican II response to this initial call by John XXIII. See, Council Fathers, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World - *Gaudium et Spes*,” in *Vatican II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery (Dublin, Ireland: Dominican Publications, 1996).

and challenges experienced by those in formation, and more aware of the signs of struggle and concern experienced by candidates.

10. Formators at all levels receive ongoing professional development and supervision that is intellectual, technical and experiential.
11. Lay friars are encouraged to meet regularly at the conference (SAAOC) level to share their experience, gain insights, receive training and further formation, and enhance collaboration.

Appendix Two:

List of Participants

1	Thomas Thekkal John	Province of St Thomas, India
2	Charles Bernard	Province of St Thomas, India
3	Bernard Shaw	Foundation of St Joseph Vaz, Sri Lanka
4	Titus Angga Restuaji	Province of St Michael the Archangel, Indonesia
5	Stanislaus Sukartanto	Province of St Michael the Archangel, Indonesia
6	Nasarius Trimuryanto	Province of St Michael the Archangel, Indonesia
7	Roberto Fernandes	Foundation of St Anthony, Timor Leste
8	Agustinus Adil	Province of St Francis the Herald of Peace, Indonesia-Papua
9	Markus Meran	Province of St Francis the Herald of Peace, Indonesia-Papua
10	Ellias Logo	Province of St Francis the Herald of Peace, Indonesia-Papua
11	Vernon Chua	Custody of St. Anthony, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei
12	Michael Goh	Custody of St. Anthony, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei
13	John Soh	Custody of St. Anthony, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei
14	Gerald Tan	Custody of St. Anthony, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei
15	David Leary	Province of the Holy Spirit, Australia-New Zealand

The Organising Committee

Vernon Chua (host entity)

Titus Angga Restuaji

Charles Bernard

David Leary

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