



Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother
U.S./Caribbean Province
SSM Associates

**MANUAL FOR THE
EMPOWERMENT
OF SSM ASSOCIATES**

VISION STATEMENT

A vision statement is often referred to as a purpose statement, a mission statement, or the goals and objectives. It is a statement of the uniqueness of the organization.

The vision statement of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother Associates is:

Together with the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Third Order Regular of St. Francis of Assisi, associates strive to:

- Deepen their relationship with God through prayer and the building of faith sharing communities.
- Intensify their identity as God's people and grow to the full potential God intended for them.
- Share jointly with the Sisters in ministerial outreaches.
- Be present in the name of the Sisters when called forth.

EMPOWERMENT OF THE SSM ASSOCIATES

For the Vision to be realized associates united with the sisters strive to reach the full potential God intended for them by becoming empowered. Some of what empowerment does for an associate includes the following:

- Helps associates by providing ways for them to participate fully in the sisters' prayer life and ministry, and encourages them to more fully realize their inherent power with each other. It also assists associates to grow spiritually.
- Brings about the Congregation's full potential through the mutual sharing and exercise of power by both sisters and associates.
- Exemplifies each individuals' intrinsic self worth and value through the openness to and acceptance of the empowering of both sisters and associates.
- Creates collaboration and partnership in bringing about the vision of the SSM Associate Movement. Being empowered encourages sisters and associates to help each other identify the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and tasks necessary to achieve the desired and designated vision of the Movement.

ASSOCIATES EMPOWER EACH OTHER BY:

- Respecting, trusting and having confidence in each person.
- Striving collaboratively to realize the Vision of the SSM Associate Movement.
- Providing necessary information, the authority to make decisions, and the resources to carry out one's responsibilities.
- Encouraging independent movement and trusting persons to do what they have promised to do.
- Supporting and coaching others in all their efforts for growth.
- Keeping communication open, honest, and responsive.

EMPOWERMENT OCCURS WITHIN A SUCCESSFUL ASSOCIATE CLUSTER

The associate cluster, as a faith-sharing community, includes the following traits:

- Associates understand and believe in the SSM Associate Vision. They are sure of themselves, know why they are together, and are aware of what is expected of them.
- Associates are open and honest, know and appreciate others and respect the personal values of each one.
- After prayer and discernment, a well functioning group does not straddle the fence but makes decisions and acts on them.
- Associates in a cluster know they aren't alone. They know how they are affiliated with the SSM Community, and they continually look for specific ways to integrate with the sisters. They encourage and invite others into the group.
- Associate know how to celebrate, and they do it often. They realize that all celebrations are linked with the growth and meaningfulness of why they are associates and that all celebrations are essential to the associate, the cluster, and the Movement.
- The cluster leadership team monitors itself. Often they should ask such pertinent questions as: (1) Are we prepared? Does any one person dominate? Are members participating? (2) Are members being asked to do too much? Is everyone carrying their fair share? (3) Are we promoting a positive image? Are we marching to a cluster drummer or to our own? Are we promoting self-interest or are we promoting team cohesiveness?
- The leadership team schedules regular associate gatherings to provide opportunities for community-building.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE LEADERSHIP TEAM

The responsibility of the leadership team is to plan well so as to provide the opportunity for associates to attend, participate in, enjoy, and find the gatherings worthwhile.

The leadership team will:

1. Meet prior to each gathering to prepare necessary materials, determine roles for each team member, and discuss processes to be used. Some of these processes and/or responsibilities can be:
 - Assigning a prayer and faith sharing facilitator.
 - Sending notice and agenda of upcoming gathering to all members.
 - Selecting someone to prepare the site and/or prayer center.
 - Assuring the record keeper is present to record the summary to send to Associate Director and cluster members.
 - Preparing a schedule or plan for upcoming gatherings.
2. Create a phone relay process so that all associates can receive information and notices in a timely manner.
3. Send all pertinent information of gatherings, happenings, events, projects, and activities selected by the cluster to the director.
4. Send invitations to the sisters and distribute to the associates any materials or invitations shared by the sisters, especially those of upcoming retreats, days of reflection, etc. Associates are encouraged to make every effort to attend as well as to respond to a call from the sisters to represent them.
5. Identify and prepare those who will mentor prospective associates. These mentors are to use the guidelines in the Associate Resource Manual and ensure that the prospective associates complete all necessary requirements, eg., application form, setting a time for an interview with the Associate Director, etc.
6. Encourage and recruit others to become associates and keep in contact with current associates.
7. Keep members' addresses and phone numbers current.

CHECKLIST FOR EFFECTIVE GATHERINGS

The leadership team might use the following checklist prior to an associate gathering. Items can be either checked as they are completed or a note made to record any follow-up actions which the team needs to take:

- Determine the duration and place for the gathering and make the necessary arrangement.
- Designate each person's responsibility in the roles of facilitator of the gathering, faith-sharing leader, prayer leader, and creator of prayer environment.
- Designate the recording function.
- Develop the agenda for the gathering. Keep in mind the suggested format for all gatherings. Provide ample time for prayer, faith-sharing, discussion, ministerial outreach sharing , and necessary business matters.
- Establish priorities for items, especially business matters.
- Remind associates of the need for confidentiality, especially as they engage in faith-sharing.
- Send notices of the place, date, and time of the upcoming gathering. Include the minutes and/or summary of the activities of the last gathering.

SSM ASSOCIATE GATHERINGS FORMAT

The purpose of the gatherings is important, and the leadership team is encouraged to follow this format as closely as possible.

PRAYER: Every gathering should open with prayer. This can be the Office, another form of prayer, Scripture, a reading from a book, or a spiritual message. This is to focus the group and set the tone. Time should be devoted to quiet so that each participant can unclutter their mind of all the busyness of daily life. This prayer time can be any length but should be sufficient and not rushed.

FAITH-SHARING: Flowing from the prayer, there should be a period of faith-sharing. This time is used to apply the prayer, passage, or reading to a person's own faith journey. In deepening our awareness of God in the world, it is important to tell stories and share the experiences of God present in our lives.

Faith-sharing requires being open to reverently listening to the other. There is neither discussion nor judgment of what the other has shared. *Listening* means not comments are necessary, but just the presence of a loving heart, a clear mind, and an open ear. Depending on the number present, this sharing can vary from 20 to 30 minutes in duration. No person should feel rushed. However, neither should a person go on for an extended period of time nor monopolize the time to the exclusion of others.

ASSOCIATE RESOURCE MANUAL AND STUDY GUIDES: These should be reviewed periodically to remind members of their content and to share new ideas regarding each. The period of faith-sharing is followed with time to share insights, to ask questions or to comment of some section of the Manual or the study guides. These discussions are intended to clarify ideas for the group, to learn more about the history and heritage of the SSM Congregation, to deepen spiritually, to learn more about our faith, to delve into what it means to be an associate, and to foster the building of supportive faith-sharing communities.

MINISTERIAL OUTREACH: During this time associates may wish to share how their personal ministerial outreach is going and to ask the group for prayers and support. It is also at this time that the group hears about the expressed needs and requests of the sisters. It is the opportunity to discuss possible ways to respond and determines how the cluster will respond. As these outreaches are shared, it is the time to come to the WELL so that each one may feel accepted, heard, and nourished by those present.

This time is not to be used to champion a particular personal issue. It is also not the time to deliver a speech or give a long harangue on a topic dear to one's heart.

BUSINESS: This is the period when those 'nitty gritty' details are covered. It is time devoted to the necessary details, actions needed to be taken, things in need of doing and who will do them, and settling time issues.

DURATION OF A GATHERING: It is wise to plan quality gatherings and to keep the prayer, sharing, and discussions moving and on point. It is important to create an atmosphere in which each associate knows and appreciates the other and the time spent together. This is not just another meeting that associates have to attend. **An associate gathering is a grace and spirit-filled time spent with others who walk the same faith journey.**

Following this format will help nourish associates, dynamically enhance the cluster, attract prospective associates who might be present, and fulfill the purpose of being associates.

FAITH-SHARING

In a faith-sharing community it is essential that associates communicate intimately with each other about the core issues of their lives. For associates, this is faith sharing and it is truly an extension of one's daily personal prayer.

A faith-sharing cluster is not a discussion group, a sensitivity session, not a social gathering. During the faith sharing time, associates do not share and receive intellectual or theological insights. Nor is the purpose of faith sharing accomplishment of some predetermined task.

The purpose of the faith sharing time is to listen with an accepting heart and be open to God who continues to reveal Himself in each person and in the community represented by those who come together in His name. The fruit of faith sharing is the building up of the Body of Christ. Further, associates realize that what is shared in the group is kept in confidence, neither judged nor commented on.

The approach to the faith sharing time is one of reading and reflecting together on the Word of God in Scripture. Faith sharing calls us to share with each other, out of our deepest center or the core of our being, what it means to be a follower of Christ and an associate in our world today. To authentically enter into faith sharing is to come to know and love each other in Christ whose Spirit is the bonding force of any community.

Faith sharing calls forth in each one the practice of the value of presence. Presence is the ability to be authentically with another person. Being authentically present with another comes from self-knowledge and is so contagious that another person is able to ponder the depths of who she/he is with awareness and clarity, knowing that what is shared will be held in trust.

SOME INTERPERSONAL SKILLS NEEDED

Every associate has the responsibility to integrate, focus and give witness to the Vision of the SSM Associate Movement. Associates need to be consistent in all their endeavors. To accomplish this, associates must commit to the further development of needed skills. These skills are not just for the leadership team, but they are skills that all associates are capable of learning and using.

Associates will strive to:

- Value each other, be respectful, trusting, and loyal.
- Be affirming and supportive of each other.
- Be good listeners and cultivate open communication and dialogue during the gatherings.
- Foster cooperation and participation in order to further the creative spirit of the cluster.
- Share information and resources, practice consensus when decisions are to be made, and cooperate in the plans made.

EMPOWERMENT SKILLS

INSTRUMENTAL SKILLS: These are the skills of our mind and hands. They are the skills of intelligence, craftsmanship and profession, which enable one to be professional and competent. They begin to develop in our early years and continue to be honed through formal education. Instrumental skills are the combination of working with tools and with the use of the intellect. In other words, these skills are the ability to work with hands, tools, and head.

Some instrumental skills include the ability to”

- Read, write and count (language skills).
- Speak clearly and correctly (public speaking skills).
- Think logically and discern.
- Manage time and resources.
- Master new skills in your profession.
- Be competent in your work.
- Grow spiritually (knowledge of Scripture, prayers and meditation skills).
- Diet, exercise, and keep physically fit.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS: These are skills that deal with the emotions that bring about human cooperation rather than isolation. They enable us to objectify and identify feelings so as to enhance social interaction. Persons with interpersonal skills have the ability to act with generosity and understanding toward others, eg. with empathy. Empathy is the ability to enter into another’s world and to be so with that other person that they feel a deep sense of acceptance and presence.

Some interpersonal skills include the ability to:

- Show and share emotions appropriately.
- Identify ones own feelings accurately as well as another person’s.
- Take time to know the personal side of others and show a genuine interest in their families, leisure activities, and work lives.
- Have social events where you can get to know people personally.

- Not allow outside distractions to interrupt personal discussions.
- Develop listening skills and resist the temptation to problem solve.
- Keep all personal discussions strictly confidential.
- Keep a calendar of birthdays and recognize people on significant dates by sending them cards and notes.
- Remain calm in times of stress and anxiety.
- Cope with conflict productively.
- Give and receive feedback non-defensively.

IMAGINAL SKILLS: These are skills of generating new ideas and creating images through the creative evaluation of complex data. It is these skills whose primary job it is to integrate internal fantasy and information with external information gathered by the five senses. These skills are the basic ability to recognize the independent and authoritative value of one's own uniqueness and capability. It is these skills which enhance our capacity to learn from direct experience, to choose and to act creatively on alternatives and options.

Some imaginal skills include the ability to:

- Make your values conscious.
- Combine and adapt new information.
- Initiate totally new ideas from seemingly unrelated data.
- Perceive hidden meaning in data.
- Dream and imagine new futures that are possible.
- Generate new ideas and images by brainstorming and using "think tank" techniques, and to risk and try out new ideas.
- Utilize several modes of communication, such as poetry, music, and dance.

SYSTEM SKILLS: These skills involve the ability to see and understand how all the parts of any complex organization of data or of an institution relate to the functioning of the whole. These skills also include being able to make decisions based on knowledge of the whole organization rather than on any one of its parts. System skills involve the ability to design and plan change once the direction is clear. System skills are a blend of imagination, sensitivity, and competencies.

Samples of system skills include the ability to:

- Move comfortably with process.
- Differentiate in small group settings between interpersonal and system needs.
- Clarify group dynamics and complexity.
- Synthesize complex statements and emotional input.
- Set priorities creatively in the face of internal and external pressures.
- Speak with clarity and be understood by people of differing educational levels, cultures, and walks of life.
- Engage in long-term system planning, goal setting, and policy-making.

LISTENING SKILLS

Good listeners strive to be:

Accepting
Trusting
Attentive
Non-judgmental

Understanding
Invested
Engaged
Non-defensive

Some Roadblocks to Good Communication:

1. Ordering, directing, commanding – (“you must...”, “you have to...”)
2. Warning, promising, threatening – (“you had better...”)
3. Moralizing, preaching, obliging – (“you should...”, “you ought...”)
4. Advising, giving suggestions or solutions – (“What I would do is...”, “Let me suggest...”)
5. Persuading with logic, arguing, teaching, lecturing – (“Why don’t you...”, “Yes, but...”)
6. Judging, criticizing, disagreeing, blaming – (“You are not thinking straight...”)
7. Withdrawing, distracting, humoring, diverting – (“We can discuss it later...”, “That reminds me when I...”, “Well, its not as bad as...”)

LISTENING SKILLS (2)

There are three stages of listening: Attending, Following, and Responding.

ATTENDING:

Attending means paying close attention.

- Maintain a relaxed posture.
- Look directly at the other. (Eye contact is important)
- Rest your mind and allow your senses and instincts to “listen.”

FOLLOWING:

Following means walking alongside another and allowing them to lead you.

- Do not interrupt, divert, impose your opinions, or press to have your own views heard prematurely.
- Remain genuinely interested.
- Encourage by: Your movements, or a nod or smile.
Brief, sincere comments such as “me too” or “certainly.”
Descriptions of person’s body language, such as “that seems to make you uncomfortable.”

RESPONDING:

Responding with understanding flows naturally from sincerity, empathy, and compassion.

- Respond without advice-giving, making snap comments, or judging what the other person has said.
- Affirm the other’s feelings: “How frustrating that must have been for you.”
- Paraphrase what the speaker emphasized before introducing a new topic: “you did everything you could to get the point across. I wonder if we could move to the next point.”

GUIDESLINES FOR GIVING FEEDBACK

BE DESCRIPTIVE AND CONCRETE:

“When you spoke in a low voice, I found it hard to heard you.”

“Because you smiled at me, I felt more comfortable amongst all these strangers.”

- Avoid evaluative comments such as “You mumble all the time.”

GIVE SPECIFIC DATA ABOUT BEHAVIOR:

“When you turned your body away from the speaker, I thought that you cut yourself off from the speaker.”

“When you asked a number of questions, the speaker seemed to get distracted from his/her train of thought.”

- Avoid evaluation comments such as “You always have to make sure your comments get heard.”

DESCRIBE THE EFFECTS THE BEHAVIOR HAD ON YOU:

“I felt cut off when you turned away from us.”

“I felt included when you looked me in the eye.”

- Avoid generalizations such as “Everyone says you cut us off.”

FEELING WORDS

Afraid	Dissatisfied	Joyful
Aggravated	Distrustful	Lonely
Aggressive	Disturbed	Lost
Amazed	Eager	Mad
Ambivalent	Elated	Miserable
Amused	Embarrassed	Neglected
Angry	Empty	Nervous
Annoyed	Enraged	Outraged
Anxious	Enthusiastic	Overjoyed
Apathetic	Envious	Panicky
Apprehensive	Exasperated	Patient
Ashamed	Expectant	Perplexed
Astonished	Fascinated	Playful
Attentive	Foolish	Pleased
Awed	Forlorn	Powerless
Baffled	Frantic	Pressured
Bashful	Frightened	Proud
Bewildered	Furious	Puzzled
Bitter	Generous	Reckless
Boastful	Flad	Refreshed
Bored	Gloomy	Rejected
Calm	Grateful	Remorseful
Cautious	Grouchy	Resentful
Cheerful	Guilty	Sad
Comfortable	Happy	Safe
Confident	Helpless	Sarcastic
Confused	Hesitant	Satisfied
Content	Hopeful	Scared
Critical	Hopeless	Shocked
Crushed	Horrorified	Stubborn
Curious	Hostile	Stunned
Daring	Humiliated	Surprised
Defiant	Hurt	Suspicious
Delighted	Ignored	Sympathetic
Depressed	Impatient	Tense
Desperate	Impulsive	Terrified
Despondent	Indecisive	Tired
Disagreeable	Indignant	Trapped
Disappointed	Inquisitive	Troubled
Discouraged	Irritated	Upset
Disgusted	Isolated	Vulnerable
Displeased	Jealous	Worried

SPIRITUAL CONSENSUS: A WAY OF COMING TOGETHER IN CHRIST

INTRODUCTION:

How many of us have attended a meeting where few decisions could be made because everyone had his/her own idea of what they thought should be done. It is a hope, shared by all, that we would have every encounter and every meeting be like this quote from Psalms which says:

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.” Ps. 133: 1-2

The process of making group decisions can either divide those involved into factions or can knit them together into a strong faith community. The practice of majority rule that seems to dominate our culture today tends to create winners and losers. A majority can easily gloss over the concerns of a minority even when the minority loses only by a vote or two. Sometimes those who exert the most pressure are the ones who prevail and use aggressive behavior to get their way. Unfortunately this often works and members of the group may feel ignored, beaten, or alienated. The feelings and contributions of the less vocal are often discounted and soon forgotten by those who “carry the day.”

Another approach to making group or community decisions is CONSENSUS. Consensus creates neither winners nor losers. This process literally means: perceiving or discerning together. A group that seeks consensus avoids taking votes and instead searches for solutions that satisfy the group as a whole. Anyone in the group who feels strongly can stand firm and delay arriving at consensus. But consensus does not mean unanimity; rather, it suggests that a sense of the group exists and that everyone feels sufficiently heard to be able to go along with the emerging sentiment. It is important that people who have concerns articulate them clearly to the others.

At times, a group may not come to consensus on a given matter. The time may not be right. In such situations, the consensus of the group may be that more time and prayer are needed. Such lack of resolution is part of the human experience. Rather than being viewed as failure, it can be seen as a clarifying point on the path toward communion with one another and with God.

Consensus often unfolds over time and may not fit into the group's pre-designed schedule. Allowing the Spirit freedom to work in the group is more important than reaching a definitive outcome at a particular time. For consensus to succeed, every member must remain open to seeing things in new ways. Everyone needs to listen and look for ways to bring things together. As in all of our human dealings, consensus requires an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. For most groups, developing consensus is achieved through discussion and debate.

Spiritual Consensus for Faith-Sharing Communities is a particular approach to consensus. While it draws upon human skill and talent and makes full use of available data, study, and discussion, it goes beyond them to wait upon the Holy Spirit for guidance and direction. It is important that the group cultivate an attitude of humility that flows from a conviction that each of us has limited vision, that even collectively we see but partially, and it is only God that sees everything. Beyond that, those seeking spiritual consensus work under the assumption that God speaks through each person, most especially those who gather in Christ and are focused on reverent listening. It is essential that each person be willing to move away from preconceived ideas, prejudices, stereotyping and personal preferences. Spiritual discernment emerges from a shared desire to discover what God is saying to each one together as a faith-sharing community.

Spiritual consensus brings those involved together at a very deep level, engendering love and nurturing trust in both God and one another. This may enable a group to develop a position that frees individuals to hold divergent opinions and pursue varying courses of action. When people are bonded together in the Holy Spirit, they do develop mutual respect that honors the integrity of each person's point of view. Unity does not require nor does it mean uniformity.

Spiritual consensus can produce compromise, but more typically those gathered usually start to see the situation from a totally new perspective that reveals a path not previously envisioned. Whereas a compromise rarely energizes anyone, a totally new idea that breaks through from God produces enthusiasm (*en theos*, literally "in God").

We cannot achieve spiritual consensus by merely fine-tuning group skills and techniques. Although spiritual consensus takes practice, ultimately it comes from PRAYER and is a GRACE-FILLED gift from God. Those who are patient and wait for the Holy Spirit as they confront their common concerns will experience the love of God bonding them together in heart and mind.

STRIVING FOR CONSENSUS

1. A proposal for a cluster decision should be submitted in writing to the leadership team first and then to the cluster members at least one week before the gathering at which it will be discussed. The necessary background reading materials, data and other information needs to accompany the written proposal.
2. The proper attitude in the consensus process requires that the group has a desire to arrive at a common conclusion. The group consents to the process prior to beginning.
3. Members should be prepared to state their position and reasons. Members are to accept the responsibility for listening to each other so that all members are heard. Active listening techniques are essential to this process.
4. Differences over ideas, methods or the solutions should be seen as helping rather than hindering the process in reaching consensus. Consensus then becomes a group effort rather than an individual effort.
5. Open and honest communication is needed in developing or arriving at consensus. Members should not just agree or assume the position of compromise with the proposal simply to avoid conflict.
6. The facilitator guides the group to a conclusion by periodically checking for consensus. The ability of the facilitator to lead and unify the group is an important factor in achieving consensus.
7. If there is no consensus do not assume that some people will have to win and others must lose. Rather, look for the most acceptable alternative for the majority of the group.
8. The end result will be a decision that everyone in the group can accept and support completely.

CONFLICT TECHNIQUES

Work toward:

- Understanding the other person's point of view.
- Listening attentively for the other to articulate his/her feelings.
- Compromising when it is deemed appropriate.
- Exploring specifically what issues you agree and disagree upon to narrow the focus of the discussion.
- Problem-solving as best you can.
- Getting another person to mediate the discussion if no progress is being made.
- Suggesting ways in which both you and the other person stand to gain something.
- Clarifying what the other's specific goals are.
- Apologizing when it is appropriate.
- Taking a time-out to reconsider the options.
- Being sensitive to the other's feelings.
- Getting everything out in the open.

TAKE AN HONEST INVENTORY

Each member of the associate cluster should take an honest inventory of their interactions with the group periodically and especially at times of decision-making when emotions may run a bit stronger. In an effort to live strong Christian values, striving to build up our fellow cluster members is a very important aspect. In order to assess our ability to interact with others with love and respect, these are some questions for our personal reflection:

- How much do I talk? Do I dominate? Do I hold my thoughts and feelings and refuse to show my hand?
- How frequently do I interrupt others who are speaking?
- What does my body posture say to others?
- What do my facial expressions say? Am I conscious of what my face is expressing?
- Do I welcome feedback? How do I react when I receive it?
- How do I let others know what my needs are?
- How do I react when I don't agree with something? Do I hold out with silence? Do I react quickly and strongly before I think?
- Do I tend to what to clarify and justify things that I say until I "am sure" that I am understood or do I let the Holy Spirit do what is needed?
- Do I truly feel a balance between what I value and what I express?
- Do I hesitate to affirm others or give them a supporting word because of shyness or uncertainty or do I let my assurance of the Love of God give me courage to speak and act with love and grace?
- Would I ever be accused of "letting go and letting God?"