



A SPARK OF HOPE IN SHAMOKIN
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Jesus said to St. Francis, “Go, rebuild my house, which you see is falling into ruin.” So, Francis rolled up his sleeves and got to work rebuilding churches. In time he and his early followers would go to Rome and ask for permission from the pope, to live the Gospel. The pope refused to entertain the request of the poor brothers, but later he had a dream of his cathedral falling into ruin and a beggar stepping onto the scene to hold up the church. That beggar was Francis.



When the Conventual Franciscan Friars arrived in the United States at the end of the 19th century, they primarily engaged in ministry to German and Polish immigrants. Together, with the communities they served, they built a lot of churches! By 1900 the friars had established themselves in Shamokin, Pennsylvania. Driven by coal mines and the Eagle Silk Mill (one of the largest in the country) Shamokin was once in the running to become the capital of the State of Pennsylvania. It was also the city of Thomas Edison and boasts having the first church in the world to be lit by electricity!

In time, the mines and mills closed causing a sharp decline in population. Today, the city of Shamokin is but a shell of what it once was. Unemployment, crime, drugs, and a host of other problems take hold as depression sets in. Churches and schools close as vacant properties fall into blight. This was the situation in early 2017 when I received a phone call from the Guardian of the friary in Shamokin.

He began our conversation saying, “I received a call from a professor at Bucknell University. They want to partner with the friars to do projects of sustainable development in Shamokin.”

“And?”, I replied.

After a long pause he said, “Of course I told them yes! Then I immediately called you. So, tell me, what exactly is sustainable development?”

The next morning, I was in the car driving to Shamokin. In no time at all staff and students from the university began visiting. Their first project was called *Holy Pierogi*. All the parishes in the area make pierogi and other types of ethnic foods. For years the proceeds of the sales would go to special projects. Now, the money raised goes to paying the electric bill! The students came several times to Shamokin and learned the delicate art of pierogi making, which in turn helped them to develop a marketing strategy that increased the sales and greatly helped the parishes.

This was just the beginning. By September of the following year, the friars had formed a Faith Alliance for Revitalization (FAR). FAR helped to reorient Shamokin from dwelling on the glory days of the past while sitting in the midst of depression, to positively engaging the present with a mindfulness that decisions made today would affect future generations. This is the heart of sustainable development, which the friars quickly embraced and invited others to engage. No longer were the friars building churches. Now we were helping to hold up the community of the church that was in danger of falling into ruin.

We had formed, in just over a year, a faith alliance of revitalization that included people of faith, professors and students of Bucknell University, members of a recently formed business alliance, regional social service agencies, and members of government at the local, state, and federal level.

What began with a simple *Holy Pierogi* project, had grown and resulted in a 3-day workshop that brought 160 interested residents together to brainstorm ideas for the present and the future. This gave birth to citizen led revitalization efforts to recycle metal and electronic devices, begin a group called Shamokin Community Gardens, develop programs for disadvantaged children, and to open an art studio featuring local artists. Eventually FAR was involved in the process of tearing down blighted buildings to create pocket parks and green space, while also strengthening the work of the Shamokin Creek restoration efforts to minimize the adverse effects of mining on water.



To uphold the church, to hold a community together, one must first become a part of that community and experience not only its joys, successes, and hopes, but also its pain, sin, and sorrow. Only by sitting with people in their despair could a spark of hope be lit for the community. This is how the friars helped to keep the church, the people of Shamokin from falling into ruin, and then worked alongside the citizenry to rebuild the community.

In the following years I would bring young friars to Shamokin to learn from the people and the work of FAR. One evening, I had scheduled our dinner to be at the local soup kitchen. That morning the friars asked what time they needed to arrive to cook or prepare to serve the food. I told them that they were not going to work, but that like everyone else, they should arrive at 5pm to stand in line. When they had their plates of food, I encouraged them to sit at the various tables. Looking at their confused faces, I said, “The people here have important things to teach you. Sit with them, eat with them, and listen to them.”

Later that evening I asked one of the friars what he heard the people at his table say to him. He shared with me their stories. Then he looked me straight in the eye and said, “In so many words, they were telling me that just my being present in this community these past days, and listening to the joys and struggles of their lives, was helping to rebuild the church. It wasn’t so much the service projects we helped with, but rather just the fact that we showed up.”

Whether it was Francis of Assisi and his early followers rebuilding churches or the friars and citizens of Shamokin holding up a community that was falling into ruin, just showing up can be all that is needed to light a spark of hope.