

Social Justice Cross-Conference Teams

As we continue to grow the social justice network across Canada, challenges remain at the conference and council level. The revised national statutes of the Society include social justice as a recommended agenda item at every meeting. The National Council also supports appointing social justice reps at every council/conference. Even if your conference has a social justice rep, it is often difficult to have more than a few minutes at the conference meeting to discuss social justice. In addition, the level of interest and knowledge at the conference level can be minimal.

Therefore, the concept of having a council level social justice committee which has reps from as many conferences as possible is a viable and positive option. If we use the term cross-conference it emphasizes the inclusion of all conferences coming together to discuss a common issue.

The goal of the cross-conference social justice committee is to bring together like minded members wanting to work together in a manner that is collaborative, structured and organized. In addition to discussions and actions regarding social justice issues, this committee should also strive to change the culture of the conference and council from a focus on transactional charity to a social justice relational ministry approach.

A cross-conference team model would permit to break down silos between conferences, and allow emerging leaders to interact with others wanting to work together on common structural causes. Some presidents resist working beyond an action based transactional charity approach, and are blocking the potential of interested members, as well as future members, who want to do more to better serve persons in need.

The cross-conference team allows members to come together to focus on common goals and projects and to bring these lessons learned back to their conferences. Successes, challenges, solutions and future action steps are discussed as a team. They feel supported and they belong to a team working together to move forward with the social justice movement.

The team approach can identify various actions and projects and develop a common and consistent approach which they can also take back to their conference. If the social justice reps can develop a consistent approach to social justice which they take back to their membership it could well lead to more members joining this movement.

I would encourage all councils to consider starting this social justice team approach, even if it starts with only a few conference reps. If you already have a social justice committee, this team approach with regular meetings is an essential component of on-going success.

The cross-conference team concept was pioneered in the Halton, Ontario Particular council and has been very successful in achieving a high level of success. The Halton model includes 10 of 13 conferences currently and they continue to encourage the others to join. The team meets monthly except for July, August and December. They use the “taste and see” approach where anyone with an interest in social justice is welcome to attend a meeting. This cross-conference team discusses possible projects and actions as well as current issues that may require advocacy. There is also time to share various resources that each conference is aware of. This forum has allowed the Halton team to work and mature collectively in their roles of informed navigators, being the link from awareness to access to programs, opportunities and services that can help the family move towards a healthier and more sustainable lifestyle. Some of the projects Halton has discussed and developed include the RESP/Canada Learning Bond, Dental programs, Recreation, Registered Disability Savings Plan and student assistance programs. The Halton team effort demonstrates what we can accomplish within the group dynamic of the social justice cross-conference team approach. While the Halton council president does not attend team meetings, she is an active supporter of the team and is apprised of the meeting through the minutes. This format also encourages other members to lead the team. I would like to

recommend that every council or existing social justice committee consider adopting a similar format to the Halton cross-conference team approach.

Finally, an excellent project for all social justice teams, committees and reps is to take an active part in our 3-year national housing campaign. The campaign theme is "***Safe, Secure and Affordable Housing is a Human Right***" is certainly one that can be enhanced by the local grass roots participation of our membership. Please advocate within your council/conference for a discussion about how you may be involved.

Jim Paddon, Chair
National Social Justice Committee