

Society of Saint Vincent de Paul National Council of Canada



THE SOCIAL JUSTICE GUIDE

March 2021

Introduction:

Social justice was a very important part of what Frédéric Ozanam envisioned for the Society. The Society has always responded to the needs of those living in poverty by such social action works as home visits, food banks, soup kitchens and shelters. We have always remained open to speaking about poverty issues and where needed acting to change systems that keep people living in poverty. However, more than ever in today's ever-changing world, there is a need to do more regarding social action. While we use the term social justice to best describe this issue, it is very much about systemic change and looking at the root causes of poverty with the goal of either advocating for changing existing ways we help those in need or by developing new ideas and programs. Indeed, the most important change may be our own personal transformation towards one that is concerned with the human dignity we are given by God at birth. Social justice includes advocacy, systemic change, restorative justice, Indigenous peoples and environmental issues.

The biggest challenge remains educating our own membership about social justice and attracting more members to get involved in these issues. Our Society is also faced with an aging membership which may lack the energy, knowledge or manpower to do more. The formation of a Social Justice Committee is an essential component of any success we may have regarding social justice. The Social Justice Committee has the potential to give added importance to the council as the body that enables conferences to work more closely together and to maintain a high level of communication.

Role of the Social Justice Committee (SJC):

If the particular council has a social justice rep or a committee, this SJC would have the ability to act as the social justice voice of the council. The social justice chair would attend regular conference meetings and report to the council as well as present social justice news at all meetings. If there is no SJC, the council president should endeavour to form a committee. This committee can be formed from members from the various conferences. There should also be an emphasis placed on the recruitment of new social justice members to the Society. The topic of social justice may be an attraction to parishioners who would not otherwise consider joining the Society.

Central or particular - We encourage every particular council (PC) within a central council (CC) to form a SJC. This will enable the PC to more easily work with its conferences and parishes. Ideally every conference will appoint a social justice rep to work with and be part of the PC SJC. The Vincentian and Catholic Social Teaching Concept of Subsidiarity strive to allow decisions and actions to be determined at the grass roots level. The concept of this network can effectively give every conference and member, the opportunity to learn about social justice and to become more involved.

Recruitment - The council level SJC is encouraged to develop and implement a recruitment plan at the parish level with a goal of attracting parishioners with an interest in social justice to become active SJC members.

Resource roster -The concept of recruiting parishioners with a wide range of work and volunteer experiences could be used to create a resource roster of people who could be called on for their expertise in various fields, thereby enhancing the ability of our members to provide a full range of assistance to those we serve.

Steps

1. The social justice rep or council president to canvas all conferences to recruit SJC members.
2. The social justice rep or council president should request each conference to appoint a social justice rep for their conference.
3. The council's SJC can then form its committee from amongst the conference reps.

Orientation:

The SJC and reps will be provided with resource material as well as being able to contact the National Council of Canada (NCC) SJC chair or regional reps for support and guidance. If members of a SJC are new to the Society they should also be given instruction about the Society and its mission, values and charitable works.

Structure:

1. The chair of the SJC is a SSVP member.
2. The SJC to hold monthly meetings.
3. Chair to be a member of the PC and provide a written report to the PC.

Results:

The council SJC will be able to coordinate all social justice activity within the council area and maintain communications between all conferences. A successful recruitment program can bring new members who would be dedicated to social justice activity but who may also get involved in other SSVP activity once they are exposed to our charitable works.

Appendices:

1. The 7 habits of highly effective Social Justice Committees.
2. Building Social Justice Committees.
3. Ten Building Blocks of Catholic Social Teachings.
4. Role and Responsibilities of the Social Justice Committee/rep.
5. Social justice reps/coordinator.
6. What does Frédéric Ozanam have to say about social justice?
7. Why do we need to be concerned about social justice?

Summary

Please provide the NCC SJC Chair with contact information if you have a Social Justice Committee at your council. Send name and email to: social-justice-chair@ssvp.ca. Visit our national website (www.ssvp.ca) and check out social justice for information and news as well the Vincenzapaul - Social Justice Editions (February, June, and October). Join our Social Justice Facebook group.

Appendix 1

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Social Justice Committees *by* *Joe Sullivan*

Several weeks ago, my friend Erich Rutten and I were talking about parish social justice. He asked me what I thought were the characteristics of a successful parish justice effort. In the spirit of Steven Covey's celebrated book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, here are seven items that seem to separate the best committees from the average ones:

1. **Faith-centered.**

Successful committees read the stories of the Old and New Testament. They pray together before their meetings begin. When they bring issues before the parish, they talk about how the scripture, from age to age, calls us to defend the poor - the widows, orphans and aliens. In short, these committees never forget who they are or where they've come from. With one foot firmly planted in the Bible, they have a credibility that makes their advocacy an act of faith, not just an act of civics. They make it a priority in their personal lives and in their committee meetings to pray and reflect on the spirituality that drives justice work.

2. **Organized.**

There's a saying: "If you don't know where you're going, you'll probably end up somewhere else." Our best justice committees set goals and timetables for their work. They print and stick to an agenda, take minutes, and hold people accountable when they don't follow through. They evaluate their progress and report back to the parish on a regular basis. This kind of behavior prevents them from feeling like they're not accomplishing anything. And their parish doesn't lose track of what the committee is doing.

3. **Creative.**

For some strange reason, many people act like creativity is a gift God dispenses in small doses to just a few, artistic-type people. Not! The best committees thrive on creativity. They spark the imagination of an otherwise indifferent assembly by presenting social justice in a creative way. Like what? One parish passed out packets of salt to raise awareness about Communities of Salt and Light. Ribbons, to raise awareness about AIDS. Writing letters about hunger to politicians on paper plates instead of stationery.

A committee can be successful if it allows the creativity of the Holy Spirit to move in and among its work. The Spirit can challenge us to take calculated risks to get the message of social justice to our assemblies.

4. **Relational.**

Successful committees are made up of people who never lose track of their relationships with parishioners at the center of the parish. They network and make connections between issues, people, and talents. An example? When working on a local environmental issue, a justice leader sought the advice of a person who worked for the DNR, a local business leader, a homeowner who lived near

the site, and an outdoor enthusiast. All of these "experts" were in her parish. Nearly half of them were interested in getting more involved in the issue after she took the time to listen to their views.

The best committees seek out the average parishioners for their committees, not just the passionate activists. For the chair, this often means more time training and bringing people up-to- speed on Catholic Social Teaching, issues, etc. But the successful committee knows that its work is driven by its relationships with the center of the parish, not internally focused on the committee's favorite issues.

5. **Focused on Justice.**

There's pressure on committees to do lots of projects or programs. A social ministry effort can grow to include twenty or more avenues for charitable work - everything from soup kitchens to sockmending. Successful committees avoid the tendency to let quantity become the measuring stick of how well their justice program is doing. Successful committees don't try to do everything. Instead, they focus on getting parishioners to understand the structural forces in society that keep people in poverty. Once they do that, they make the connection with scripture and how our faith calls us to live. Finally, they create simple ways for people to act once their awareness is raised.

6. **Educating for Action.**

Some of the best committees live out the idea that justice is not merely a matter of being aware of events in our world - it is taking a hand in shaping those events. They believe that conversion of heart without an action response is simply not enough. So, when they teach the parish about an issue, they offer several vehicles to act right at/after the event. People are presented with options on how to respond. Some actions require more time and commitment than others.

7. **In for the Long Haul.**

Shared leadership is the hallmark of a highly successful justice committee. The leaders take the long view and are always grooming new leaders and delegating responsibilities to various members. It's very different than the way most committees bring in new members - into what I call an 'air of desperation.' You know: "Gosh, thanks for coming. We were almost extinct..." Great committees celebrate who they are and what they are doing -- and they have fun, too! The feeling new members get is more like: "We're glad you're doing justice work with us, because we think you'll find it gives you meaning and purpose in life." When we stop feeling that way about social justice work, perhaps it's time to take a rest.

[The above article was first printed in the June 1995 edition of Acting for Justice. It was reprinted in Salt of the Earth magazine].

Appendix 2

Building Social Justice Committee Some Tips and a Sample Mission Statement

Social justice is the work of every baptized person. By social justice we mean changing policies, structures, and institutions so they work on behalf of the common good.

The core planning group gets things started for the parish, provides opportunities for all parishioners to get involved, constantly visits with members of the community to surface issues, and organizes them for actions that lead to effective social change.

The public life of the parish is just as essential as the inner life of the parish. At every level -- internal and external -- we seek to develop just processes and policies to govern ourselves.

Common Steps in the Formation of a Parish Social Justice Committee.

1. Convene (personal invitation and appointment) a beginning core committee of seven to ten members.
2. Develop a brief vision statement and some operating guidelines to be approved by your parish council. (Keep the council on board with you. They too must own the development of the social justice effort. Use every opportunity you can to keep them informed and moving with you).
3. Compile a list of the activities currently happening in your parish which are involved in social needs/outreach. Distinguish the works of charity from social change projects. Keep the focus of the SJC on the long-term, structural and systemic change.
4. Provide educational experiences for the committee and gather information:
 - Biblical/Scriptural Foundations for Catholic Social Teaching
 - Basic principles from Catholic Social Teaching
 - Archdiocesan programs and resources for justice work
 - Skills workshops and training of volunteers for effective action
5. Contact existing justice committees at neighbouring parishes
6. Conduct visits with parishioners to surface key issues of interest in your local community. What are some of the problems you hear? How do the various issues relate to one another? List and discuss as a group.
7. Establish goals and plans for action with a simple timetable.
8. Procedural items to be decided quickly include:

- How will you keep the pastor, pastoral council, staff and other committees informed and working with you?
 - Establish a simple budget to begin to cover mailing costs, paper/copies, speaker fees, educational workshops for leadership, etc.
 - Who will facilitate the meeting? Who will record minutes accurately and distribute to others? Who will be designated contact for archdiocesan mailings?
 - Who on staff will serve as a liaison to the SJC? (pastoral minister, director of religious education, deacon, etc.)
9. Many committees like to meet in regional gatherings where they exchange information and get new ideas. This is an important act of solidarity for all committees, young and old alike. Contact the NCC Social Justice Committee Chair for a list of contact persons in your region.
10. If you get stuck, or find an issue you want to work on but are unsure of how to begin, contact the NCC Social Justice Committee Chair : social-justice-chair@ssvp.ca.

Sample Mission Statement

The mission of the SJC is to serve the parish as its primary resource and catalyst for the work of social justice.

Operating Principles

1. We will operate as a SJC of the SSVP Council of _____.
2. We will base our activities on the biblical and theological foundations of Catholic Social Teaching.
3. We will emphasize the "option for the poor" by pursuing issues which address the dignity and rights of people who are socially, politically, or economically disadvantaged.
4. We will maximize opportunities to assist and work with organizations, coalitions, and neighborhood groups to promote our common interests.
5. We will give priority to strategies which enable people to realize and act on their own power.
6. We will operate from and promote social action that includes both the private, personal commitments to justice and public, communal, and institutional commitments to social justice.

Appendix 3

Ten Building Blocks of Catholic Social Teaching

by William J. Byron¹ (edited)

Principles, once internalized, lead to something. They prompt activity, impel motion, direct choices. Unfortunately, many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of Catholic faith. Listed here are ten principles that guide Catholic Social Teaching. The first eight of these principles were culled from the relatively brief "Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops," as the second subtitle of *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching* describes this published product of the (U.S.) National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The last two principles are culled from additional texts.

1. The Principle of Human Dignity.

Every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and therefore is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family.

This is the bedrock principle of Catholic Social Teaching. Every person - regardless of race, sex, age, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, employment or economic status, health, intelligence, achievement or any other differentiating characteristic - is worthy of respect. It is not what you do or what you have that gives you a claim on respect; it is simply *being* human that establishes your dignity. Given that dignity, the human person is, in the Catholic view, never a means, always an end.

The body of Catholic Social Teaching opens with the human person, but it does not close there. The principle of human dignity gives the human person a claim on membership in a community, the human family.

2. The Principle of Respect for Human Life.

Every person, from the moment of conception to natural death, has inherent dignity and a right to life consistent with that dignity.

Human life at every stage of development and decline is precious and therefore worthy of protection and respect. It is always wrong directly to attack innocent human life. The Catholic tradition sees the sacredness of human life as part of any moral vision for a just and good society.

3. The Principle of Association.

The person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society - in economics and politics, in Law and policy - directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community.

The centerpiece of society is the family; family stability must always be protected and never undermined. By association with others - in families and in other social institutions that foster growth, protect dignity and promote the common good - human persons achieve their fulfillment.

¹ Father William J. Byron, S.J. is a university professor of business and society at St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia, Pa. He is an author and contributor to the Catholic weekly, America.

4. **The Principle of Participation.**

People have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together for the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Without participation, the benefits available to an individual through any social institution cannot be realized. The human person has a right not to be shut out from participating in those institutions that are necessary for human fulfillment.

This principle applies in a special way to conditions associated with work. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected - the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

5. **The Principle of Preferential Protection for the Poor and Vulnerable.**

In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, Catholic teaching recalls the story of the last judgment (Mt. 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

Why is this so? Because the common good - the good of society as a whole - requires it. The opposite of rich and powerful is poor and powerless. If the good of all, the common good, is to prevail, preferential protection must move toward those affected adversely by the absence of power and the presence of privation. Otherwise the balance needed to keep society in one piece will be broken to the detriment of the whole.

6. **The Principle of Solidarity.**

Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means learning that 'loving our neighbor' has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

The principle of solidarity functions as a moral category that leads to choices that will promote and protect the common good.

7. **The Principle of Stewardship.**

The Catholic tradition insists that we show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation.

The steward is a manager, not an owner. In an era of rising consciousness about our physical environment, our tradition is calling us to a sense of moral responsibility for the protection of the environment - croplands, grasslands, woodlands, air, water, minerals and other natural deposits. Stewardship responsibilities also look toward our use of our personal talents, our attention to personal health and our use of personal property.

8. **The Principle of Subsidiarity.**

This principle deals chiefly with the responsibilities and limits of government, and the essential roles of voluntary associations.

The principle of subsidiarity puts a proper limit on government by insisting that no higher level of organization should perform any function that can be handled efficiently and effectively at a lower level of organization by human persons who, individually or in groups, are closer to the problems and closer to the ground. Oppressive governments are always in violation of the principle of subsidiarity; overactive governments frequently violate this principle.

9. **The Principle of Human Equality.**

Equality of all persons comes from their essential dignity. While differences in talents are a part of God's plan, social and cultural discrimination in fundamental rights are not compatible with God's design.

Treating equals equally is one way of defining justice, also understood classically as rendering to each person his or her due. Underlying the notion of equality is the simple principle of fairness; one of the earliest ethical stirrings felt in the developing human person is a sense of what is "fair" and what is not.

10. **The Principle of the Common Good.**

The common good is understood as the social conditions that allow people to reach their full human potential and to realize their human dignity.

The social conditions presupposed by Catholic teaching presuppose respect for the person, the social well-being and development of the group and the maintenance by public authority of peace and security. Today, in an age of global interdependence, the principle of the common good points to the need for international structures that can promote the just development of the human family across regional and national lines.

What constitutes the common good is always going to be a matter for debate. The absence of any concern for or sensitivity to the common good is a sure sign of a society in need of help. As a sense of community is eroded, concern for the common good declines. A proper communitarian concern is the antidote to unbridled individualism, which, like unrestrained selfishness in personal relations, can destroy balance, harmony and peace within and among groups, neighborhoods, regions and nations.

Appendix 4

Role and Responsibilities of the Social Justice Committee and Representative

General Objective:

Promote Working for social justice by (*Section 3.20 the Rule*):

- Identifying Root causes of poverty and contributing to their elimination.
- Affirming the dignity of each human being as created in God's image.
- Seeing social justice issues from the perspective of those in need.
- Opposing discrimination of all kinds.
- Fostering new attitudes of respect and empathy for the people we serve in our mission of charity.

Terminology:

Council Social Justice Committee - Umbrella committee which can include social justice reps and representatives of systemic change, Voice of the Poor Advocacy and Prison Ministry as well as other issues. To act as the essential means of communications between all levels of the Society.

Conference Social Justice Representative - Responsible for promoting social justice issues in their conference and communicating with their council social justice rep.

Council Social Justice Representative – promote social justice issues in their council. Communicate with their regional social justice rep.

Regional Social Justice Representative – Responsible for coordinating, promoting and communicating with the Social Justice committees and reps at all levels in their designated geographical jurisdiction. To represent their region on the NCC Social Justice Committee.

Activities;

All activities should be developed in collaboration with the council SJC.

- Provide social justice leadership on Systemic Change, Advocacy, Prison Ministry and other related issues within the conference / council.
- Initiate the process of working with those we serve to bring about fundamental change designed to help lead them out of poverty.
- Establish social justice as an item of business on every meeting agenda. (Conference Rep at the conference meeting, PC Rep at the PC meeting, etc.).
- Initiate discussion on social justice issues at conference/particular council meetings. Utilize resources available on website or current events for this purpose.
- All social justice reps have a responsibility to help recruit and develop members that have a social justice interest into the conferences/particular councils.

- Arrange for Systemic Change and Advocacy training for the members of the conference/particular council.
- Arrange for guest speakers at conference/particular council meetings to educate members on specific issues
- Promote the use of the National Council and regional websites as sources of information on social justice.
- Coordinate the work within the conference/particular council to identify the root causes of poverty and of and the barriers to getting out of poverty for the people served.
- Retain awareness within the conference/particular council of the resources available to help those they serve.
- Identify social justice issues when they arise in conference/particular council meetings.
- Interact with other conference and council social justice representatives to develop solutions to poverty.
- Share with the National Council, the regional council and the SJC, and with other conferences and particular councils, activities undertaken and ideas for advocacy or systemic change.
- Distribute materials on social justice issues (available on national and regional websites, Voice of the Poor and Systemic Change pages) to Vincentians and parishioners as deemed appropriate.
- Collaborate with other parish groups (poverty reduction coalitions, Catholic Women's League (CWL), Knights of Columbus (K or C), schools, social justice groups, etc.) on social justice issues.
- Network with other community service groups to share ideas on social justice issues.
- Encourage Vincentians and others to speak up for those we serve when they cannot speak for themselves. Search for opportunities and help the people we serve speak up for themselves through attendance at community meetings, participating in letter-writing campaigns and petitions, etc.
- Social justice reps shall coordinate and communicate with the conference / particular council reps in their area on a regular basis. In turn, they will report activities and request assistance from the Voice of the Poor and Systemic Change committees as required.

If you have any questions or comments please contact the NCC Social Justice Committee Chair:

social-justice-chair@ssvp.ca.

Appendix 5

Social Justice Coordinators

Who are social justice coordinators?

Social justice coordinators are Vincentians who want to alleviate the poverty that they encounter in their work of serving their neighbours in need. They look for the root causes of poverty and find ways to eliminate them. They strive to see the issues from the perspective of those in need.

Why do social justice coordinators do what they do?

Social justice coordinators see that their neighbours in need are worse off year after year. They are sicker and more demoralized because their standard of living keeps deteriorating. They want to know how to help change people's lives for the better.

How do social justice coordinators work?

Social justice coordinators learn from their neighbours in need: about their problems and about their hopes and dreams. Seeing poverty issues from the perspective of the person who is living in poverty can lead to more effective solutions.

Social justice coordinators learn about the ways that people are trapped in poverty by the way our society works. They learn about income levels for people living in poverty, access to education and health care, inequality and employment issues.

Social justice coordinators share their insights with other Vincentians at conference or council meetings and invite others to share their perspectives to help find solutions. A five-minute social justice discussion at every meeting can result in greater awareness for all Vincentians.

Where can a social justice coordinator get information?

The neighbours in need are the best source of useful information.

Studying local or national media about employment, housing, or access to health care issues can give ideas for what needs to change.

The Society's websites give valuable information about social justice issues.

Then what?

When Vincentians know what should be done, they can find other like-minded people or organizations to work with because there is power in numbers. Together they learn the skills so that they can advocate for many things: better incomes and health care, housing, and education and so on.

Advocacy should address all levels of government: local, provincial, and national. Contact should always be constructive and positive. For provincial or national advocacy topics, statements and campaigns need to be reviewed by the regional or National board.

Social justice will not be achieved quickly but we must start on the journey. Social justice is both necessary and possible for the sake of our neighbours in need and our country.

Appendix 6

What does Frédéric Ozanam have to say about social justice?

The following chronology outlines Frédéric's evolving attitude toward changing the social structures that kept people living in poverty in his era.

1835 Frédéric's writings on social problems.

- Importance of improving the conditions of the working class.
- Alerted the rich and politicians to the discontent of the times.
- Regarded poverty as an extreme injustice.
- Stated that everyone had the right to work, to be fed and to be treated with dignity.

1840 France population of over 34 million:

- Wealth of the nation was held by 200,000 landowners.
- Middle class formed a new aristocracy that was more interested in getting rich than in taking care of the working class.
- Poverty was the condition of many of the Parisians.

1847 Before revolution in France, Ozanam established his political position on the side of the people when Ozanam wrote:

- "... I was asking that we do the same as the pope, that instead of espousing the interests of a doctrinaire ministry, a frightened peerage, or a selfish middle class, we concern ourselves with the masses who are rightly claiming a greater share in public affairs, who have too many needs and not enough rights, and who are wanting guarantees against unemployment and against extreme poverty; the masses who have bad leaders for want of finding better ones, ... It is in the masses that I see sufficient faith and morality to save a society, the upper classes of which are already lost."

1848 Revolution, the country was tired of being controlled by the selfish middle class so Ozanam wrote:

- "... I want a peaceful republic, protective of all civil, political and religious freedoms and liberties, without the intervention of the State in matters of conscience. And finally, with the respect of ownership, industry and commerce, I want institutions which can help improve and change the lot of the workers. I want not so much the organizations of the work itself, but the organization of the workers in associations, either amongst themselves, or with their employers."

Appendix 7

Why do we need to be concerned about social justice?

By Corry Wink, Social Justice Committee

I have spent about ten years making home visits to people who called my parish office for help because they didn't have enough money for their most basic needs: food, clothing, and furniture. When I started this work, I hoped and believed that the help we provided would help improve the quality of life for the neighbours in need that we served.

I have seen that people living in poverty are losing ground every year and their quality of life is deteriorating because the annual increase in their income was less than the rate of inflation, so they couldn't afford as much as the year before. Furthermore, the cost of the most basic needs such as food, shelter, and utilities often rose more than the general rate of inflation.

Sometimes we hear, "Why don't they just get a job?" That is such an easy thing to say and not so long ago it was possible for a person with a low level of education to get gainful employment. These days it's a different story and for many of our neighbours in need it's practically impossible to get a job that will pay for a decent standard of living. Minimum wage rates are generally too low to lift even a single person out of poverty. Often, it's impossible to get full-time jobs because it suits employers to give people part-time schedules or short-term jobs. It is very disheartening for people on assistance to try to improve their situation with earned income. It seems that there is no way for them to get ahead because the system is stacked against them.

When people have lived in poverty for a long time, their mental and physical health is eroded so badly that they become incapable of working for a living. They become depressed and lose the skills they once had.

We think that Canada is a blessed country and for many of us it is. However, about 1 in 7 Canadians lives in poverty as Statistics Canada defines it. The charity that we give cannot change their reality; it can never be enough.

Many of our neighbours in need are caught in the cycle of poverty because of the way our society works; we call it systemic poverty. Canada is a country that is rich enough to provide all its citizens with a dignified standard of living. The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is committed advocacy that will lead to a more just society where there will be opportunities for all Canadians. We each have a part to play.