

# Guidebook for Creating a Social Justice Committee

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## Introduction

The Office for Peace and Justice has created this guide to help you through the process of starting a social justice committee in your parish. This is not meant to be an intensive set of rules, but a guidebook with a suggested method for starting and maintaining a social justice committee. As always, our office is willing to assist you and answer any of your questions or meet with you.

## Forming a Parish Social Justice Committee

1. Form a Core Group
2. Develop a Mission Statement and Objectives for the Group
3. Schedule a Formation Opportunity for the Group
4. Create Procedural and Meeting Structures
5. Choose Issues to Focus On
6. Contact Other Area Justice Committees
7. Stay Informed

## **Print Resources:**

**Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church**, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004

**Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage**, David J. Obrien and Thomas A. Shannon, ed. (Orbis Books; Maryknoll, NY; 1995.)

**Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret**, Peter Henroit, Edward DeBerri, Michael Schultheis, (Orbis Books; Maryknoll, NY; 1992.)

**Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy** by the U.S. Bishops

**Doing FaithJustice: An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought**, Fred Kammer, S.J. (Paulist Press, New York; 1991.)

**Living Justice : Catholic Social Teaching in Action**, Thomas Massaro, S. J. (Sheed and Ward, 2000.)

**Responses to 101 Questions on Catholic Social Teaching**, Kenneth R. Himes O.F.M. (Paulist Press, 2001)

## **7. Stay Informed**

It is important to continue your educational formation after the initial creation of the group and formation day. Below is a list of websites and print resources that are useful tools for any social justice committee. The Office for Peace and Justice can direct you to educational resources as well.

### **Websites:**

**Archdiocese of Chicago:** [www.archchicago.org](http://www.archchicago.org)

**Vatican Website:** [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

**US Bishops:** [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org)

**Catholic Campaign for Human Development:** [www.usccb.org/cchd/](http://www.usccb.org/cchd/)

**Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform:** [www.justiceforimmigrants.org](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org)

**Catholic Relief Services:** [catholicrelief.org](http://catholicrelief.org)

**Catholic Conference of Illinois:** [www.catholicconferenceofillinois.org](http://www.catholicconferenceofillinois.org)

## **1. Forming a Core Group**

Begin by inviting 6-12 individuals to join you in a start up meeting for a social justice committee in your parish. You may choose to place an announcement in the bulletin, send letters of invitation to people who you think could possibly be interested in joining the committee and/or simply talk to fellow parishioners about it. By far, personal invitation is the most effective way to get people involved.

Try to choose a date and time for the meeting that you feel would work out for most people. Once you have the group together for the first meeting, the committee can collectively choose a time that they are more comfortable with if the initial meeting time does not work out. It is suggested that the committee meet once or twice a month for 1-2 hours per meeting.

During your first meeting you may want to discuss why you feel having a social justice committee is important to your parish and community. This is a good time to share educational resources as well. Using the first couple of meetings to learn about and reflect on the basics of Catholic Social Teaching will help guide future discussions about the mission statement and objectives of the committee. Many people are not familiar with Catholic social teaching, so allowing time to learn about justice teaching and issues is a crucial part of the formation process. The Office for Peace and Justice website has a list of suggested resources.

## 2. Developing a Mission Statement and Objectives

It should be noted that developing a mission statement and objectives can be done after the formation day (step 3), or even during the formation day. Some committees may prefer to create a mission statement early on to have a guiding point, while others may choose to wait until they have had more time to learn about Catholic social teaching. This decision is up to each individual group.

A **mission statement** should only be a sentence or two long and explain what your group is going to do and how it is going to do it. A mission statement is a general statement and serves as an inspirational reminder of the committee's purpose.

**Objectives** on the other hand, are specific actions the committee seeks to take in light of the mission statement. Objectives can and will change or evolve as the group and the parish do. You may also choose to change your objective as you choose new justice topics to focus on. Typically a committee may choose to outline 3-5 objectives to work with and then reevaluate those objectives once yearly.

## 6. Contact Other Justice Committees In Your Area

There may be other parishes with justice committees in your area. It is always helpful to speak with others who are doing similar work to share ideas and cosponsor events. You may even consider creating a social justice "cluster" in your area with representatives from the social justice committees of each parish meeting periodically to share information and collaborate on initiatives. You can contact the Office of Peace and Justice for a listing of the justice committees in the Archdiocese.

## **5. Choose Issues to Focus On**

Social Justice encompasses a wide variety of issues. These issues are all part of the same “whole” of Catholic social teaching. While being committed to each of these aspects of human dignity, no committee can address them all equally. Eventually your committee will find certain issues more appealing than others. Choosing a handful of topics allows your committee to have a concise focus and to be more effective. You may find that certain issues come up naturally through a community or parish need, or that your committee chooses to focus on a topic that they know little about in order to educate themselves as well as the parish/community.

Below is a list of common justice issues. This is by no means an all inclusive list, but may be helpful when your committee begins to narrow down its focus to just a few issues. Like your committee’s objectives, the issues you focus on can and will change.

### **Social Justice Topics:**

Africa -- AIDS	Environmental Justice	Minimum Wage
Budget – Federal/State	Health Care	Poverty
Campaign	Housing/Homelessness	Racial Justice
Finance Reform	Human Rights	Socially Responsible Investing
Children and Child Care	Hunger	Sweatshop Labor
Citizenship	Immigration Reform	Tax Justice
Criminal Justice	Just Wages	Third World Debt
Death Penalty	Labor Rights	War
Domestic Abuse	Landmines	Welfare

\* Issues such as, abortion, euthanasia and stem cell research are part of Catholic social teaching . Some parishes have Respect Life Committees to address these issues already. If yours does not these issues can/should be included for consideration as well.

## **Example:**

### *Mission Statement:*

The Social Justice Committee of St. Blank’s, in light of the Gospel message of peace and justice, seeks to enlighten and empower our faith community, to seek justice and promote human development, through education, formation and action.

### *Objectives:*

1. To continually educate and inform ourselves about Catholic social teaching and current justice issues.
2. To provide educational resources for the parish in the form of bulletin inserts or informational packets about selected justice issues.
3. To provide opportunities for parishioners to engage injustices through letter writing campaigns and volunteer experiences.
4. To seek out and collaborate with other area social justice committees.

### **3. Schedule a Formation Opportunity**

Time should be taken early in the development of your social justice committee to set up a formation opportunity. This formation opportunity, typically an afternoon (3-4 hours) is simply a time to learn more about Catholic social teaching, to address the differences between Charity and Justice, as well as a time to talk about the mission and vision of your committee. Each parish and each social justice committee is different, so the formation day can be used as a time to better clarify the focus of your committee.

You can contact the Office for Peace and Justice to request a speaker or facilitator for your formation day. This person can discuss with you the specific needs of your committee and create a formation day that is appropriate for your group.

The formation day does not need to be restricted to people already committed to the committee. Inviting everyone from the parish to participate in a formation day may actually be an opportunity to get more people involved in your justice work.

It is also a good idea to have your next meeting a week or two after the formation day so that the information and ideas discussed during at that time will still be fresh in peoples minds.

### **Sample Formation Day Schedule:**

1:00pm: Opening prayer and scripture reading  
1:15pm: Basics of Catholic Social Thought—speaker  
2:00pm: Break  
2:15pm: Justice and Charity –speaker and group discussion  
3:15pm: Break  
3:30pm: Developing a mission and focus for the committee—  
group discussion  
4:15pm: Closing prayer

### **4. Create Procedural and Meeting Structures**

Once the committee has been formed, the mission has been clarified and objectives have been stated it helps to clear up questions of procedure. You may want to take sometime, perhaps an entire meeting to clear up questions like:

- Who will facilitate the meetings?
- Who will take down minutes during the meetings?
- How will decisions be made?
- Is there a budget? How will funds be allocated?
- *Who* will keep the parish informed about your work and activities and *how* will your keep the parish informed?