



Living the Gospel: Engaging Small Communities in Social Action

Core Community Meeting

Aim

To provide an opportunity—through presentation of information, prayer, and discussion—for participants to:

- Grow in awareness that faith missions us to love others—as individuals, as groups of people, and as a society—and to seek justice on their behalf.
- Understand that the Social Inquiry Method is a tool for discerning ways to respond in love to human needs, to universal issues, and to society.

Opening Prayer

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, you created all peoples of every nation in your image and likeness. Open our eyes to the strength of your love for all people. Open our minds to your intervention in every pressing human situation and social issue. Give us the humility and discernment to enter into your love, mercy, justice, and patience for all humanity. Open our hearts to your compassionate understanding. Show us where to begin. We ask this through your Son, Jesus, our Lord and brother. Amen.

Song (optional)

“We Are Called,” by David Haas, © 1988, GIA Publications, Inc., 7404 South Mason Avenue, Chicago, IL 60638

Reading Matthew 25:31–46

Leader’s Introduction

Justice is not just a certain type of activity but an attitude toward life that affects all our actions. It has been said that justice is about being in a right relationship with all we encounter. It is a way of understanding one’s relationship with others and with all creation. Understanding literally means “standing under,” that is, putting one’s own perspective aside for a moment and attempting to see through the eyes of the other. True understanding requires humility, especially when the other is someone quite different from us or someone scorned by society. In Jesus’ day, the poor were blamed for their own poverty. It was believed that their poverty was punishment for some sin they or their parents had committed. But Jesus had a very challenging response. He saw our essential dignity as human beings created in the image of God. He saw people as forgiven by a merciful Father and called to conversion in response to this forgiveness. As we read this Scripture passage, we see that the factor determining who will be justified in God’s eyes at the end of time is our relationship with the poor and vulnerable. The justified are those who, out of a sense of humility, see the essential dignity of each human being, and reach out in forgiveness and compassion: “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you

took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.... just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:35–36, 40).

Faith-Sharing Questions

(Core Meeting Handout)

1. In what ways am I a sheep? In what ways am I a goat?
2. How have I experienced justice or injustice in my life?
3. What injustices do I see around me? What can I do about them? What can my community do?

Leader’s Reflection

One of the elements of small group gatherings is mission, which begins with the demands of the gospel and God’s invitation to mission. The self-understanding of the Church, the larger community of believers, is that we are to do what Jesus did. Both Christian spirituality and community are imbued with a sense of being called to move toward specific missions that realize the reign of God in our lives and in the world. This is especially evident in the use of the RENEW small community component called “Action Responses.” But there are intermediary steps that community members experience which can assist them in sorting through the issues that touch them as they reflect on possible responses and renew a commitment to live their faith in daily life.

One of these steps is the experience of community itself. Sorting through the many pressing and universal needs of the world around us can be a daunting task for individuals. Daily life has a way of being colored by the many needs of the world around us. The vast scope of human needs can sneak up on us when we see newspaper headlines or turn on the nightly news. Serious social problems can find their way to our doorstep. We may find that our efforts to imitate Jesus bring us face-to-face with something bigger than what we can handle individually. In small communities we can offer and receive mutual support in facing these larger human needs. These communities, furthermore, become a place to consider many different responses through direct acts of charity or, on a larger scale, through efforts to bring about social justice.

Another intermediary step is that of the Social Inquiry Method. The Observe, Judge, Act approach is one adopted by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (Belgium, 1882–1967) as he founded the Young Christian Workers (YCW) in 1924. YCW sought to enable workers to re-Christianize their own lives, and their working and social environments. The movement took root in the United States, especially through the Christian Family Movement (CFM). CFM sought to restore families to Christ and to create small Christian communities that would impact their daily lives, their parishes, and the wider society.

The Social Inquiry Method challenges us to do three things: to **see** the issues that face our world; to **judge** what is needed by using the yardstick of gospel values and Catholic teaching on social justice; and to **do something** as baptized Christians who have been graced for mission. In doing so, the method helps small group members fulfill some of the ideals for community mentioned in *Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope for the 21st Century*. These ideals include the ability to: “see contradictions between their actions and their values; think through a Christian response; [and] move to appropriate action.”¹

Leader’s Instructions:

Invite people to take a few minutes to review what is at the heart of this method so they can decide if they would like to offer small community leaders training to use this tool. Invite them to read the “Social Inquiry Method” section on their handout. Then form small groups of four to six people and have them work through the Group Exercise at the bottom of the handout.

Business Meeting Agenda

1. Review previous meeting's minutes and actions.
2. Possible actions to further the topic, "Engaging Small Communities in Social Action," with small Christian communities and the parish:
 - Form groups to discuss important Church documents on small communities and social action: John Paul II: *The Church in America (Ecclesia in America)*; *On Social Concern (Sollicitudo rei socialis)*; Paul VI: *On Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii nuntiandi)*; U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops: *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States*; *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*. [See Links and Resources, under the topic on *Living the Gospel* (www.ParishLife.com) for full references.]
 - Decide to print the downloadable workshop, "Living the Gospel: Engaging Small Communities in Social Action" from www.ParishLife.com. Use it to lead a three-hour session for yourselves, for small Christian community participants, and/or for your parish at large.
 - Decide whether to consult RENEW International to help organize a workshop and/or run it. (Contact Michael Fabian: SCCServices@renewintl.org; 908-769-5400, ext. 144.)
 - Establish a committee to evaluate results of the discussion groups and/or the workshop, in order to determine further actions to take place.
 - Provide a guest speaker and evening of reflection on this topic.
 - Establish a parish library of books and tapes on social action, or increase the number of volumes in an existing library.
3. Assign tasks to individuals and groups.
4. Discuss other action items.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray.

God, we thank you for this time together. Thank you for the challenge of your Word and the support of this community. We place our needs before you, trusting that you hear us and respond to us with compassion and wisdom. Let us offer our prayers of petitions. (The response to each petition is "Lord, hear our prayer.")

For those who suffer the injustice of _____ (*invite people to name specific injustices*)

For those who are poor because they lack _____ (*invite specific petitions*)

For those who are oppressed by _____ (*invite specific petitions*)

For these people, for all of our loved ones, and the intentions that we hold in our hearts, we pray to the Lord.

For... *Response: Lord, hear our prayer.*

Leader: Holy God, inspire our hearts by the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may offer you the praise of seeking ways to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with You.

All: Our Father...

¹ Excerpt from *Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope for the 21st Century, Revised and Updated* by Thomas A. Kleissler, Margo A. LeBert, and Mary C. McGuinness. Copyright © 1997 by RENEW International. Used by permission of Paulist Press. www.paulistpress.com, p. 109.



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Social Inquiry Method

- **Observe** a concrete situation that is burdensome to others around us.
- **Judge** the situation from the criteria of gospel values and Catholic social teaching.
- **Act** as baptized Christians who have been both gifted and called for mission.

Observe

Our task is to **see** what is really happening, to look twice with the eyes of faith. God will give us the courage and compassion to **observe** the situation and the needs of each person involved. Our goal at this point is to discover a particular issue while maintaining a respect for the people involved.

Judge

It is normal to move from respect for a situation to developing a point of view. When we do, our conclusions and judgments about what is happening become a yardstick for future perceptions and actions. The Church invites us to pause and consider the scriptures and Church teaching as our ultimate yardstick in **judging** a situation. We must ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do?” and “Where do the values of Christ **match** or **conflict with** the way this situation is evolving?”

Act

Living our faith is not always easy. It takes more than knowing what is needed or right. Faith is built on seeking God’s guidance about what we *can do* in order to address the situation. Our faith in Jesus challenges us to find ways to love all parties involved in a situation. We must ask, “What **specific action** am I going to take? Is this action practical, concrete, and achievable?” Then we must be grounded in prayer and confidence that God will also assist us as we begin to act.

Group Exercise

Step one: After reading the explanation above, choose a concern (for example, financial, housing, health) or difficult situation in the geographic area of your parish. Begin with a prayer for guidance from the Holy Spirit, and then share what you observe about the needs of those involved. Try to share observations, not conclusions. Respect confidentiality.

Step two: Discuss what the scriptures and the Church have to say about these kinds of needs and situations. Share ways that God has provided new life in similar circumstances. At this stage, the focus of the small community is on the mission of Jesus and the reign of God.

Step three: Choose an *action* that flows out of *observing* and *judging*, as well as the gifts of the community, not something artificial or arbitrary. Discuss ways to carry it out. Think about ways to share the results with one another and to evaluate what will be done.