



# Living the Gospel: Engaging Small Communities in Social Action

## Reflection

Small communities can be greenhouses for renewed attention to the Word of God and a broader understanding of the call to continue the mission of Jesus. Members of small communities can also experience a new zeal for the mission of Jesus and the proclamation of God's redeeming love—whose goal is reconciliation and freedom for all humankind. But how do we help one another find concrete ways to embrace all people in every kind of need as sisters and brothers, children of the same merciful God who wants to touch all of us? Where do small groups begin? How do they connect parishioners with those who are hoping to change malfunctioning social structures that exacerbate pressing human needs? Exactly how can small Christian communities empower parishioners with approaches to social justice issues behind world hunger, refugee camps, victims of injustice, and of those who are impoverished on a global scale?

We begin with Jesus, with focusing and refocusing on Jesus who is the light of the world. We come together in small communities to learn how to reflect that light and apply gospel values to everyday life. When we gather to reflect on the scriptures and to share our personal experiences of faith, we gather as disciples—which literally means learners. We grapple with the demands of the gospel together so that we can realize the power of Jesus in our midst and the meaning of his mission. As followers of Jesus, we are called to magnify the presence and actions of God in all areas of our daily lives, in the same way that the waters of a pond ripple outward in response to a stone. The love of God is our rock and refuge, sinking into the depths of our hearts, but also moving us outward in love to ever-widening circles of people, nations, and the larger global human community.

Communities can offer a deeper appreciation for the social teaching of the Church. The leaders of the Church have consistently spoken and written about the moral concerns of God's people as they experienced them. What is unique about the present is that, since the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century and the Information/Technology Revolution of the twentieth century, we have experienced an explosion of moral, social, economic, and political questions and concerns. The letters, encyclicals, and statements of this past century have been written in response to these concerns. The Church, in its teaching, has given us principles that we can use when we are making economic, political, and social decisions. The modern body of this teaching begins with the writing of *Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor (Rerum Novarum)*, in 1891. Many other documents have followed that give flesh to the social justice stance of the Church. Small communities can pray and think through what is offered. These documents give us:

- **Principles** for reflecting on the social, economic, and political conditions in our society;
- **Criteria** for making judgments about those conditions; and
- **Directives** for choosing a course of action, a way of responding to the particular social, economic, and political conditions in our society.

Through study, reflection, and discussion on the social teachings of the Church, small community participants can apply the message of these teachings to their lives and to society. The small community offers a place for reflection that leads to action, ways to appropriate the social teaching of the Church that flow from personal concerns and daily life. One tool we can use to discern and explore social justice issues with fruitful results is the Social Inquiry Method. The Observe, Judge, Act method is an approach adopted by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (Belgium, 1882–1967) when he founded the Young Christian Workers (YCW) in 1924. This approach was expanded upon through the Christian Family Movement (CFM) which sought to restore families to Christ and to create small Christian communities that would

impact their parishes and the wider society. The Social Inquiry Method can help small communities by challenging them 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.