



# Living the Gospel: Engaging Small Communities in Social Action

## *What the Small Communities Need to Know*<sup>1</sup>

- 1. Faith-sharing groups can help us learn how to live the reign of God in our everyday lives.**  
Faith-sharing groups can be places where God's Holy Spirit invigorates a healthy community to reach out. We can begin to face a multitude of difficult issues in this setting. And, because living our faith may conflict with the values of society, our times of faith sharing and prayer can help us explore ways to have a real impact on our day-to-day world.

The Second Vatican Council encourages this exploration:

"Christ's redemptive work, while of itself directed toward the salvation of people, involves also the renewal of the whole temporal order. Hence the mission of the Church is not only to bring people the message and grace of Christ but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal sphere" (Vatican II, *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, #5).

- 2. We all face obstacles to love, as we begin to serve the needy and get involved in social action.**

Some of us may be afraid, tired, or discouraged about making a difference. Thus, it is important that we set attainable goals and means by which we can have clear successes. In small communities, people help one another discern a concrete, achievable action. An action step, or concretely living out the mission of Jesus, is something each Christian is challenged to do. Too often people think of an action step as an extra thing; but we can begin by looking for a meaningful action that touches our lives directly.

- 3. Good materials can help small Christian communities discern what actions to take.**

The most valuable materials are those that lead people to action. Usually these materials will follow the time-honored process: observe, judge, act. In other words: What is happening in my own life and the world in which I live? What does Jesus or my Christian tradition tell me about how I am to respond? What will I do differently to respond with Christian values to the various situations in my life? How can my action be specific?

- 4. We are called to respond to the basic needs of the human person.**

Pope John XXIII offers us an important piece of the Church's social teaching when he outlines the standard for basic human existence to which all human beings are entitled:

Every person has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means necessary and suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services.... A human being also has the right to security in cases of sickness, inability to work, widowhood, old age, unemployment, or [when] deprived of the means of subsistence through no fault of his or her own.... Every human being has the right to respect for the person, to a good reputation; the right to freedom in searching for truth and in expressing and communicating opinions, and in pursuit of art...to share in the benefits of culture...to a basic education and to technical and professional training...to choose freely the state of life which he or she prefers...to establish a family...to work...to private property, even of productive goods...and when there are just reasons for it, the right to emigrate to other countries...to take an active part in public affairs and to contribute one's part to the common good of the citizens.<sup>2</sup>

**5. Actions and outreach can involve addressing societal needs.**

Wherever someone is hurting, action is needed; but sometimes what can be done is not obvious. Direct service can be more obvious than actions for systemic change. For example, it is easier to gather clothes for the poor than to work for adequate housing for the poor or even to address the economic realities that keep people poor in our society. Small communities can help people begin to see structural injustices and systemic, societal needs. Outreach has to do with changing behavior as well as concrete services. Outreach, action, justice, is a way of giving flesh to the beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–10) on a larger scale.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted and adapted 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. [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997]. To order: <http://www.renewintl.org/Resources/Pages/vohadreflec.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon, eds., *Renewing the Earth (Pacem in Terris)* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1977), pp. 126–130.