

Parish Social Ministry Basics

1. Pastor

The pastor must be on board with whatever parish social ministry there is in a parish. It is vital to keep him informed as you proceed, and to enlist his support whenever possible. It is the particular responsibility of the chairperson to make certain that there is regular communication with the pastor. A good question to ask the pastor is "What is the best way for me to keep you updated about the work of our committee?" Another is: "Is there anything you really hope we'll do or anything you hope we'll avoid?"

2. Chairperson

It is best if the chairperson does not chair a sub-committee. The special jobs of the chairperson are:

- Building relationships with the pastor and other key leaders: parish council, DRE, school principal, heads of other parish organizations, diocesan social justice office, other area PSM chairs, choir director, the local interfaith or ecumenical connections, etc.
- Communication with these folks and exploration of how to connect parish social ministry to their constituency (for example, could the choir sing at the opening of the annual congress of the community organizing group to which the parish belongs)
- Recruitment of able leaders for the four sub-committees
- Responsibility for getting the committees to work together to create a vision and a plan for parish involvement that includes all four dimensions, and includes all "categories" of people in the parish (e.g. families with kids, older adults, teens, shut-ins, people with disabilities, people of different ethnicities, etc), including easily forgotten people
- Arranging for the "care and feeding" of the committee: commissioning of the committee at a liturgy, an annual retreat, grounding in Catholic social teaching, the chance to learn about parish social ministry, attendance at diocesan events, etc., specific thanks and recognition at the end of each year.
- Ensuring that there is a paper trail and that the history of the Committee's and the parish's work is passed on.

3. Structure

It is ideal to have a chairperson for PSM and four subcommittees of the Parish Social Ministry Committee, one for each of the dimensions. Before you recruit members of the subcommittees, it is a good idea to recruit an able chairperson for each. The PSM chair plus the four subcommittee chairs can work together to develop an overall plan for the year that keeps the subcommittees from scheduling things that conflict, and gives everyone in the parish the opportunity to be involved in parish social ministry in some way.

4. Recruitment of Sub-Committee Members

Five to 12 people is a good number for each sub-committee. The best way to do this is the way Jesus did: *one at a time and in person*. This requires getting to know people in the parish. The best way to do that is to make a commitment to it. Each week try to talk to at least one person who is brand new to you. Your initial goal is not to rope them into filling a hole in your committee. It is to get to know them. Figure on a half hour per person, asking them important things: Where do they come from, about their family, work, what concerns them, what they love to do, why they participate in the parish. Be prepared to respond in kind. Done well, such a conversation is a gift to you and to them. It is a chance to share what matters. Faith-based community organizing groups actually offer training in the art of the one-to-one meeting or conversation. They believe that it is the basis upon which all leadership development in a parish rests.

Not everyone belongs on a parish social ministry committee because some people's gifts lie elsewhere, and certainly everyone has times in their lives when it is not a good time to take on a leadership assignment in the parish. Keep a few notes on each person you encounter so you remember the basics about them. You never know when you may need a leader with their gifts and concerns. If you ask people to do things they enjoy they will usually say yes.

5. Meetings

- Try to meet monthly from September to June on the same day and at the same time each month. Have a predictable format. Two hours is a good amount of time.
- Have clearly stated goals for the meeting, an agenda, begin and end on time. Recruit someone to take minutes.
- Ice breakers can be a good habit. It can help build community to take a few minutes at the beginning of each meeting to give people a chance to talk to one

person for 2 or 3 minutes about some focal question. If people use the time well it is amazing how much you can enrich everyone's appreciation for each other using this tool. Especially if you are adding new people to an existing group, it helps to integrate them into the group, which is in everyone's best interest.

- Begin and end with prayer. Put some quality in it. You might want to rotate responsibility for it. *Quest*, a publication of the Hartford Archdiocesan Pastoral Department for Small Christian Communities, is a good resource to know about. It contains the lectionary readings for each Sunday and reflection questions about them. This should be extremely simple and easy to facilitate.
- Some Parish Social Ministry Committees find it helpful to divide a two hour meeting so that there is some time spent in full committee, some time in sub-committees.
- It is great to build in some in-service education at some of your meetings (see below).
- Take a few minutes just before the end to sum up the meeting. It is good to take 5 minutes at the end of each meeting for evaluation by asking the group to say what was positive, what didn't go well and ideas for improvement in the future.
- Simple refreshments---even a pitcher of cold water or a pot of tea---are a welcoming touch.
- Make sure the room you are in is comfortable.

6. Orientation of the Sub-Committees

Some options:

- Ask the parish to purchase enough copies of the *Communities of Salt and Light Manual* so that each person on the Committee can have one, or purchase one and selectively copy key sections appropriate to each committee.
- Ask the pastor or the diocesan social justice office to provide an orientation to the seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching and the four dimensions of Parish Social Ministry
- Invite a variety of speakers to some if not all of your monthly committee meetings. Choose individuals who can update your committee about something important concerning needs in your community or new resources. Give them 20 minutes or whatever time you think is reasonable. Schedule them early in the agenda. It adds interest and gives people a reason to get there on time. Examples: the social services director of your town; a member of the legislature; someone from a food pantry and someone from Food Bank; someone from the local river or watershed organization; a member of a CCHD-funded community organization; diocesan staff to talk about *Justice for Immigrants*, a campaign of the United States Conference of Catholic bishops on immigration.

- Show a different short video each month or occasionally. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops produces many videos to bring Catholic Social Teaching to parishes in an interesting way. You can preview them for later use with other groups in the parish. See a listing in the catalogue of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops: <http://www.usccb.org/publishing/>
- Go to a social justice lecture or event as a group.

7. Communication with the Parish

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal invitation • Bulletin announcement • A newsletter • A parish website • Announcements • Posters and bulletin boards • Phone trees • E-mail • Catching people over coffee in the parish hall between Masses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on the local cable access station • Stories or notices in the Catholic newspaper with photos • Stories or notices in the local weekly or daily newspaper with photos • Signs on the parish lawn • Personalized letters sent to every home |
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Every plan you have for a parish social ministry activity should have a communication plan. What combination of strategies will you use? Does your committee want to have a sub-committee just to do communication for the rest of you? Does your parish have people who would never visit the State Capitol on Catholic Awareness Day, but who would love to use their skills in graphic design or computing to help your committee?

8. Fixed Points in the Year

It is a good thing to use the first meeting of the year to get organized and the last meeting to evaluate. In between, keep the following in mind:

- Early October: Feast of St. Francis and Respect Life Sunday. There are ways to bring together education about environmental justice and care for the unborn.
- The two weekends before Thanksgiving: Two weeks before, the CCHD collection is promoted and the week before, the CCHD collection is taken up. This is an ideal time to bring in a speaker and to focus on empowerment.
- Thanksgiving and Advent: good times to focus on hunger and direct aid to poor people. You can also do justice education about why people are hungry here and around the world.
- Lent: an ideal time for a justice education series
- Late March or early April: Catholic Awareness Day at the State Capitol. Rent a bus or organize carpools and get a bunch of people to go.

9. Fun, Community and Creativity

If you build in at least one of these three elements into everything your committee does, the parish will love parish social ministry. If your committee took as its job description getting each member of the parish to each use a talent or skill they have for one day or 8 hours a year to serve people in need or to work for justice think of the good you could do and the fun you could have. Believe in the goodness of these people sitting in the pews around you. Find out what their gifts are, educate them about what justice and mercy require. The rest will take care of itself.