

Working for justice: A west side story

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

In the late 1960s, a group of seminarians set out to canvas Presentation Parish on the west side of Chicago. Their task, Father John Egan told them, was to listen to parishioners and uncover any problems. Father Egan was then pastor of the parish.

The seminarians returned with the discovery that everybody was talking about high house payments. Many parishioners complained that they had to hold down two or three jobs to meet the payments.

Puzzled at the number of these complaints, the seminarians decided to investigate property values at the county building.

What they discovered outraged them. In many instances, realtors bought houses at low prices from whites. Residents were scared with rumors of decreasing property values in racially mixed neighborhoods. Some realtors then sold the houses to minorities at exorbitant prices. A typical example: A house bought for \$7,000 and sold for \$30,000.

The problem was compounded because the area was "redlined," meaning mortgage loans were not available to it. People therefore were forced to buy on realtors' terms, with many contracts specifying that no equity was built up in the home until the final payment was made.

Uncovering that situation led to a massive campaign that spread beyond a single parish.

Motivated by the thought that "if we stand together, maybe it'll work," parishioners began to put pressure on realtors.

At its height about 500 minority families were involved and a class-action suit was filed.

But the suit never came to trial because enough minority homeowners got relief through renegotiated housing contracts.

Peggy Roach told of those events and described her involvement in that protracted fight as a most memorable experience in a lifetime of social-action work. Today she is administrative assistant to Father Egan at the Chicago archdiocesan Office of Human Relations and Ecumenism.

"I learned a lot from the experience," Ms. Roach says. She learned, for instance, that people can accomplish something together that would be virtually impossible alone. Realtors paid attention when 20 homeowners came to talk to them about those contracts, she said. "Solidarity helped the parishioners to stand pat and not lose faith."

She also discovered once again that a personal experience of exploitation is a key to developing "more than a passing interest" in justice concerns. Minority families visited other parishes to tell their story, Ms. Roach explained. Often they encountered the response, "I didn't know that was going on here."

Many people responded by taking an active interest in the issue, Ms. Roach said. Non-parishioners helped in many ways, including writing letters to the newspapers and giving cash donations to help those evicted from their homes.

Ms. Roach's involvement in social issues dates back to her teen-age years when she attended programs sponsored by Friendship House in Chicago. These aimed at helping blacks and whites get to know each other better, she said.

Today Ms. Roach thinks employment issues, especially job retraining, hold an important spot among justice concerns. "The bottom line is jobs," she comments, as more and more people all across the board are discovering.

Asked how a beginner could get involved, she suggested that becoming an informed voter is a way open to anyone. Look carefully at where candidates stand on issues that touch the dignity of human life, she said.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)



Sold into slavery for a pair of sandals

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

At a time when the northern kingdom of Israel had reached a peak of prosperity, the Old Testament prophet Amos appeared on the scene.

It was a time of cultural sophistication — and abominable injustice within society.

The rich got richer — at the expense of the poor, who got poorer.

Respect for human dignity had vanished. People who were well-off treated the less fortunate with callous disdain.

Here is what Amos had to say about the situation:

"Thus says the Lord: 'For three crimes of Israel and for four, I will not revoke my word;

"Because they sell the just man for silver and the poor man for a pair of sandals.

"They trample the heads of the weak into the dust of the

earth, and force the lowly out of the way...

"Beware, I will crush you into the ground as a wagon crushes when laden with sheaves" (Amos 2:6-7; 13).

In that colorful way of speaking, Amos was referring to the crimes of the people. What crimes? Exploitation of weak people.

What did Amos' reference to selling people mean? Just what it says. Here is how things worked:

A poor man would find himself in a predicament and would borrow from a wealthy neighbor. The neighbor would insist on collateral, even if it was just the poor fellow's sandals or his all-purpose cloak.

Then, when the debtor couldn't pay back the loan, the wealthy man would sell the person into slavery, recouping his loan at a fat profit.

Talk about trampling the heads of the weak!

Selling a neighbor, a fellow-Israelite, into slavery had to be a low point in human relations. And all to satisfy grasping greed.

The prophet also lashed out at those women in the capital city of Samaria who, in order to pander to their own expensive tastes, goaded their husbands into further exploitation of the poor. Amos warned: "The Lord God has sworn by his holiness. Truly the days are coming upon you when they shall drag you away with hooks, the last of you with fishhooks" (Amos 4:1-2).

In modern terms, the people Amos railed against might have boasted of their gross national product and gloated over the fantastically high Dow-Jones averages.

But if these were obtained at the expense of the poor or by taking advantage of the weak, then society carried the seeds of its own destruction. It rotted from within.

Just about 30 years later,