

Working for justice: The strength of numbers

By Ivan Kauffman
NC News Service

Three years ago a group of us, frustrated by our awareness of how little one person can do to make the world more just, joined the social concerns committee at our Washington, D.C., parish. Our idea was to work on projects together and see if we could be more effective.

The woman who now heads the committee probably is typical of most members. She is employed by a large organization and although she always has been a faithful church member, she'd never before been particularly involved in activities to promote social justice.

But a few years ago she started helping out with a group which provides meals for the homeless. That beginning sparked her enthusiasm and imagination for all kinds of people afflicted by injustice. Since then she's moved on to involvement in everything from giving Christmas presents to neighborhood children to helping put on a major televised discussion of the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on war and peace in the nuclear age.

"The main lesson we've learned," she said, "is that a small group of people who care about each other and about other people can really make a difference."

She added, "I feel like I'm part of a group that cares about me, even apart from the work we do.

I feel supported."

She explained: "At one point I went through a very difficult time on my job. I never would have gotten through it without being able to talk things out in this group. I've learned so much from all of them."

Another committee member stressed the importance of combining spiritual growth with service activities. "Most of us had separated spiritual growth from our concern with social justice," he said. "But since we've started connecting the two we've discovered they're not separate at all."

Each meeting opens with a period of prayer led by group members. "That's what has given us the resources and inspiration to do what we've done," he explained.

"We've been able to help others because we had the inner resources that make you want to help people and which keep the group together," he added. "We look forward to our meetings. They're a source of energy."

In the time they've been together, the group has worked on a number of activities including:

- a series of panel discussions to educate people on the problems of the homeless;
- clinics to assist low-income families with tax-related matters;
- a forum on current problems in Central America.

During a recent meeting, a man from Central America who spoke during the committee's forum on that region thanked the group for what they were doing for his people. In response, a member commented: "We're the ones who should be grateful. We read about these problems all the time and we feel helpless. It's a privilege to be able to feel you're doing something that really matters."

Everyone involved in the committee seems to agree: It's the group that makes the difference. The members also observe that whether the issue is poverty, or abortion, or drugs and alcohol, or racial injustice, or nuclear war, concerned individuals are pretty sure to find others, probably in their own parishes, who have similar concerns.

The woman who heads the committee puts it this way: Don't be afraid of feeling overwhelmed, either by the problem or by the small number of people involved. "What we can't do alone we can do together," she says.

(Kauffman is a free-lance writer in Washington, D.C.)

Samaria fell to the Assyrians. The proud Israelites were dragged into exile.

It was the same in the southern Kingdom of Judah. Here prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah tried in vain to save their people from their greed. But people did not listen and in 587 B.C. the South fell to Babylon.

This is what a prophetic mission is all about: bringing God's message of justice to an arrogant, unjust society.

The prophets were first and foremost people who delivered God's message to their world through their words and actions. They fearlessly voiced God's concerns about contemporary society.

It follows that their words give a pretty clear picture of just what God's concerns are — and what our concerns should be.

(Father Caselot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

FOOD...

...for thought

Auxiliary Bishop Eugene Marino of Washington, D.C., told their stories during a January 1984 appearance before the House Committee on Housing and Community Development.

Bishop Marino testified that the church is making an "unprecedented commitment of resources and energy" to help alleviate the distress felt by so many poor and homeless. He added that "this commitment cannot be understood in the abstract — it only makes sense when you put human faces on the numbers."

In his statement the bishop voiced the church's growing concern for the number of homeless people in society. He cited the greatly expanded need for shelter by individuals and families with children witnessed by Catholic Charities agencies in recent years.

Urging the federal government to use more resources to help the poor, the bishop said that failing to do so undermines "human dignity, threatens the common good and betrays our national heritage."

He also observed that for Christians "the test of a society, the measure of justice in our communities, is how we treat 'the least among us,' the hungry, the homeless and the vulnerable."

—"Joe," a Washington, D.C., maintenance worker, developed drug and alcohol problems when he lost his job in a government cutback after eight years of satisfactory service. Evicted two years ago from his home, he was found living on the streets with scant hope for a better future.

—"Tom" could find only a part-time, low-paying job in North Carolina. Returning from a funeral in New York, he and his wife and children were stranded in a large city with major car problems and no money. They lived in the car for a week. The son developed pneumonia and was taken to a local hospital. The daughter was housed with a local family. Finally, helped by a local parish, the parents found housing in separate shelters for the homeless.

—"Dolores" is a Hispanic woman with severe emotional disorders. Because she has a behavioral problem, several shelters turned her away. Finally she found housing at a shelter where she also received psychiatric help. Finally, after her condition stabilized, Dolores found employment and re-entered the mainstream of life.

Each of those individuals represents a human face of a large-scale problem: homelessness.

...for discussion

1. Behind the statistics on poverty, or joblessness, or homelessness, there are human beings — individuals and families who possess dignity and human rights. What is the human toll of unemployment? What can happen to people — what is the risk — when hunger or discrimination are large factors in their lives?

2. Why do you think it so often is said in the church today that justice issues are moral issues?

3. Some of our writers indicate that it's easier to work for justice in a group with others. Why?

4. Do you know of work being done for justice in your local community? Do you know of justice needs in your local community that are not currently being met?

5. Is justice a new issue for the church, brought on by the many problems in today's world?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Pastoral Letters of the United States Catholic Bishops," Vol. 4, 1975-1983, edited by Father Hugh Nolan. In an introduction, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago writes: "Not to know and study these documents would be to miss the soul of the history of American Catholicism for these years and a significant segment of the secular history" of the United States. The bishops' statements included in the volume cover a wide variety of social justice concerns including: hunger, unemployment, homelessness, and responsibility toward the poor and persecuted in other nations. The bishops frequently voice concern in these statements for the plight of human beings affected by events beyond their control — people whose dignity isn't recognized, who are deprived of rights or victimized. (U.S. Catholic Conference, 1312 Mass. Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005. \$19.50 plus \$2 postage and handling.)