

Working Together for
Justice & Peace,
Charity & Advocacy

A Guide for Discussion and Reflection

*“We ask not to fly from the world but to engage with it;
where there is injustice let us find ways to eradicate it,
where people’s basic human rights are so exploited that
they have no life left to call their own — may we not
stand aside but fight for equality and dignity.
May we be a voice for change where there is none.”*

From the Mothers’ Union, The Prayers We Breathe, 2003

About this Guide

This workshop guide was developed by a working group of members from the Niagara Mothers' Union, Voices for Change Halton, ISARC and a social justice intern from Halton Community Legal Services for the Mothers' Union annual retreat in November 2012.

The Niagara Mothers' Union is a local chapter of Mothers' Union Canada, part of a worldwide Christian organization working for a just world by supporting and encouraging families and communities towards loving, respectful and flourishing relationships. Members of the Niagara Mothers' Union organize programs and services at a local community level.

Voices for Change Halton is a grass roots organization focused on poverty eradication by holding the government accountable for its struggling citizens, and to expose the unacknowledged truth that there are people living in poverty in Halton.

ISARC represents the solidarity of the diverse faith communities in Ontario engaged in advocacy efforts for the elimination of poverty. ISARC is listening to the needs of people living in challenging economic and social times and helping faith communities to join the problem-solving process with other organizations. Community development is foundational to the approach of ISARC's projects and activities to ensure sustainable, moral and ethical solutions to the systemic issues of poverty, exclusion and marginalization in our province.

Halton Community Legal Services is a community legal clinic funded by Legal Aid Ontario and is the sponsor for Voices for Change Halton as an extension of its commitment to systemic strategies to address poverty and promote human rights.

Partial funding for the workshop development was provided by the **Anglican Diocese of Niagara**.

Introduction

“When anyone is hungry while others have too much to eat, when anyone has no shelter while others live in luxury, or when anyone lives in poverty while others enjoy affluence, justice is not present. Where justice is not present, the quality of all our lives and communities disappears.”

ISARC 2012

In the Christian tradition, Jesus Christ relates to and embraces those who are most marginalized in society in order to confront and transform all that denies life. “Nothing about us without us” is an important principle for anti-poverty advocacy. Inclusion of those with lived experience in the struggles for their liberation is an opportunity to move from a relationship of exclusion to embrace. All too often, the social exclusion caused by poverty is as detrimental to human dignity as the material deprivation it leads to.

In 2011 relationships were built between the grass roots advocacy group Voices for Change Halton and both ISARC and the Niagara Mother’s Union. The relationship between Voices and the MU came about when the financial resources available to support the group to meet were stretched due to larger than anticipated numbers of individuals wanting to participate. The MU donated lunch for 40 people for three days as the group and allies participated in training on how to use their

collective voices as a tool for advocacy. Other allies offered additional tangible supports such as bus tickets to enable the participants to get to meetings and shared their expertise with the group. Michael Skaljin, ISARC’s Executive Director, led a workshop on election planning and raising poverty as an issue of concern in the provincial election.

In 2012 the groups looked for ways to continue to strengthen the bonds between them and the idea for dedicating the annual MU retreat to this purpose was born. In the fall a working group was formed to build a workshop based on the Parable of the Persistent Widow. The methodology of this workshop is based on community development principles and is inclusive. The workshop is not only about justice but is a form of justice. It facilitates encounters between those who have historically been marginalized in and excluded from our communities due to poverty and those who come from a background of a charity model of care.

The goal is to live the life of the widow struggling against the adversary poverty, working together for its eradication, seeking justice together.

“To hear the cry of the oppressed is the first act of justice. God does not hear without responding (and) God’s justice requires human response.”

Karen Lebacqz, *Justice in an Unjust World*, Fortress Press, 2007

The Persistent Widow 2.0

In Luke 18:1-8 Jesus tells the parable of the persistent widow who returns time and time again to the judge seeking justice. Not much is known about her. We don't know what injustice she seeks to overcome or who her adversary is. We don't know if she was forced to glean, beg or accept charity while she struggled. We do know that she acted alone, had a voice, was courageous, determined and importunate. She approached the judge with boldness, without fear and with the conviction of her rights. She was someone we would notice and admire then as we still do now.

This is the parable of the persistent widow:

"Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Discussion Questions

- 1 Who is the persistent widow of today?
- 2 Who might be the equivalent of the judge (institution or person with the power to make change)?
- 3 How could the widow have responded differently to her situation?
- 4 What relationships exist in the parable; with the widow, with the judge, with God? Are they 'just'? Is there an example of 'right relationship'? Can you describe 'right relationship'?

"Communal transformation occurs when we become related in a new way to those we are intending to help."

Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008

Charity and Justice

In 2010, ISARC's social audit process engaged people who described the effects of poverty in their lives and communities. This is an excerpt from the book recording the results of the audit, *Persistent Poverty: Voices from the Margins*:

"The last week of every month finds Sister Peggy Flanagan, seventy-two, at the Salvation Army 'Bread of Life' meal program. By that time, money has run out and cupboards are bare in the north-end neighbourhood served by the program in which Sister Peggy peels carrots and dishes up hot meals. Some people may have appealed to the local food bank as a stopgap, but you can only do that once a month. As she stands at City Hall holding a Know Peace, Know Justice sign, Sister Peggy has often been heard to paraphrase St. Vincent De Paul: 'When you feed the poor, please ask for their forgiveness. You are giving them a bowl of soup but they give up their dignity.'"

Discussion Questions

- 1 What does this excerpt say about the difference between charity and justice?
- 2 How is human dignity impacted if you are forced to receive charity while struggling for justice?

"A policy that just doles out food to people rather than giving them a choice in matters of nutrition is insufficiently respectful of their freedom."

Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, Belknap Press, 2011

Dignity and Agency

In 2010, Halton Community Legal Services challenged twelve community leaders to eat a donated food bank diet for a week in November. This was part of a provincial initiative by the Put Food in the Budget Campaign to:

- Draw attention to the fact that low income leads to poor health, productivity and learning;
- Increase empathy with the experience that in many households in Halton on fixed incomes and for low wage earners food is a 'discretionary' expense and routine reliance on food banks is required;
- Highlight that food banks are not a permanent solution to the problem of hunger in our communities.

Consider this comment by Bishop Bird on his experience eating what a food bank provided to him:

"At the end of the evening I was no longer hungry but I was still left empty in some way. I think that part of reason I was feeling this way was because this meal and the ones I would eat for two more days would be the result of what others had chosen for me. Eating is a comfort or a pleasure when you are able to choose something that you enjoy or something that has a special memory attached to it and it would seem to me that all of this is stripped away when we no longer have the power to choose for ourselves.

"Our Diocesan Vision calls all people in the Diocese of Niagara to approach our lives and our faith from a position of abundance rather than scarcity. I am wondering what that would mean for me in this situation. How can people who must rely on food banks ever have a sense of this in their life. At the Eucharist each week we recite the words of Jesus: 'I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry; who ever believes in me will never thirst.' I am left wondering: 'what is my role in making these words live for everyone.'"

Discussion Questions

- 1 What is the significance of having choices made for you or taken away from you?
- 2 How would you feel if you had to rely on what others donated for you to eat?
- 3 How would you cope if you required a special diet due to your culture, religion, or health needs and couldn't afford it?
- 4 What is the role of faith communities in responding to hunger and to scarcity in the midst of abundance?
- 5 What does this mean to you?

"Some things must be lived before they can be understood"

James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, Seabury, 1972

Charitable Giving

The 12th century philosopher, rabbi and physician Moses Maimonides believed there were eight different kinds of charitable giving. The highest level makes the recipient self-sufficient.

Maimonides Tract on Charity

In descending order, the eight levels of giving are:

- 1** *Providing a person with the resources to become self-sufficient.*
- 2** *Giving without knowing the recipient and without allowing the recipient to know you.*
- 3** *Giving with knowing the recipient but without allowing the recipient to know you.*
- 4** *Giving without knowing of the recipient but allowing the recipient to know you.*
- 5** *Giving before being asked.*
- 6** *Giving after being asked.*
- 7** *Giving happily but less than appropriate.*
- 8** *Giving begrudgingly.*

Discussion Questions

- 1** Make a list of some of the outreach activities carried out by your faith group and rate them on Maimonides scale.
- 2** Would these activities result in the recipient/s becoming self-sufficient?
- 3** What kinds of activities might promote self-sufficiency?

“Seeing people only in terms of their needs may give us a rather meagre view of humanity.”

Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Belknap Press, 2009

Kindness and Love

The Nobel Prize winning author Jose Saramago wrote:

“Just as kindness should not be ashamed of being kindness, so justice should never forget that above all it is restitution, the restitution of rights. All of them, beginning with the basic right to live in dignity. If I were asked to put charity, kindness, and justice in order of precedence, I would give first place to kindness, second to justice and third to charity. Because kindness already dispenses justice and charity of its own accord, and because a fair system of justice already contains sufficient charity within it. Charity is what is left when there is neither kindness nor justice.”

The Chinese philosopher Mo Tzu (4th century BC) promoted universal love:

“When all the people of the world love, then the strong will not overpower the weak, the many will not oppress the few, the wealthy will not mock the poor, the honoured will not disdain the humble, the cunning will not deceive the simple.”

General Secretary, World Council of Churches expressed during the panel discussion Love of the Poor: The Path to Ecumenism, September 2012.

“The poor need both charity for their immediate needs and advocacy to change the injustices of the world. Justice and peace, charity and advocacy must kiss one another.”

Discussion Questions

- 1** Dignity is integral to Saramago’s view of justice. Should we be concerned about human dignity? Why or why not?
- 2** Do you agree or disagree with Saramago’s ranking of charity, justice and kindness? Why or why not?
- 3** Saramago writes of kindness, Mo Tzu of love, are those concepts the same? How are their views similar or different from the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself? Can charity be an act of love and/or kindness? Can justice?
- 4** How does Saramago’s idea that a fair system of justice contains charity compare to the view of the Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit?
- 5** What could it mean to have charity and advocacy kiss one another?

“The transformation we seek occurs when these two conditions are created: when we produce deeper relatedness across boundaries and when we create new conversations that focus on the gifts and capacities of others.”

Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008

Advocacy

According to the World Council of Churches:

“advocacy involves actively listening to our brothers and sisters and allowing them to lament freely and unreservedly, even when it overwhelms us and brings on sorrow. It involves trust in their discernment as to what their needs are, rather than imposing our own ideas as to what is needed... Advocacy requires an unwavering commitment to accompany those who suffer, in season and out of season, whether it is costly or inconvenient, whether the need is within our own local communities or thousands of miles away.”

Praying, speaking out and acting together: Theological Reflection on Advocacy, 2009

Discussion Questions

- 1** Why is it important to actively listen to those who experience injustice?
- 2** How could listening to stories bring on sorrow?
- 3** Why is it important to let those who have experienced injustice discern their own needs and trust that discernment?
- 4** What does it mean to accompany those who suffer?
- 5** What does it mean to be an ally and seek justice in partnership?
- 6** Could being an ally be costly or inconvenient? How?
- 7** What do you or your organization need to become an ally?

Voices of the poor and oppressed provide the ‘praxis’ out of which justice must be sought. The starting point is the lived experience of those who struggle against oceans of injustice. If the story is not told, justice will die.’

Karen Lebacqz, *Justice in an Unjust World*, Fortress Press, 2007

Transformation and Change

“What we would like to do is change the world-make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And to a certain extent, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, and the poor, of the destitute-the rights of the worthy and the unworthy poor, in other words-we can to a certain extent change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever-widening circle will reach around the world.”

from By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day, Knopf, New York

Discussion Questions

- 1** What could happen if those who experience injustice and their allies fight for better conditions by crying out unceasingly as the persistent widow did?
- 2** Was the persistent widow an effective advocate?
- 3** How could other ‘widows’ have accompanied her?
- 4** How would the persistent widow’s story ended if she only received charity and did not seek justice?
- 5** Will you throw your pebble in the pond?
- 6** Would you change the way you act in the world if you thought it would change the world?

“Justice is nothing less than ‘right relationship’”

Karen Lebacqz, Justice in an Unjust World, Fortress Press, 2007

*Never Changing God
Never-changing God of Change,
Change our hearts,
Change our thoughts,
Change our Church,
Change our community,
So that we might bring true life-giving
And life preserving change through you.*

Amen