

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Social Justice Committees

by Joe Sullivan

Several weeks ago, my friend Erich Rutten and I were talking about parish social justice. He asked me what I thought were the characteristics of a successful parish justice effort. In the spirit of Steven Covey's celebrated book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, here are seven items that seem to separate the best committees from the average ones:

1. **Faith-centered.** Successful committees read the stories of the Old and New Testament. They pray together before their meetings begin. When they bring issues before the parish, they talk about how the scripture, from age to age, calls us to defend the poor - the widows, orphans and aliens. In short, these committees never forget who they are or where they've come from. With one foot firmly planted in the Bible, they have a credibility that makes their advocacy an act of faith, not just an act of civics. They make it a priority in their personal lives and in their committee meetings to pray and reflect on the spirituality that drives justice work.

2. **Organized.** There's a saying: "If you don't know where you're going, you'll probably end up somewhere else." Our best justice committees set goals and timetables for their work. They print and stick to an agenda, take minutes, and hold people accountable when they don't follow through. They evaluate their progress and report back to the parish on a regular basis. This kind of behavior prevents them from feeling like they're not accomplishing anything. And their parish doesn't lose track of what the committee is doing.

3. **Creative.** For some strange reason, many people act like creativity is a gift God dispenses in small doses to just a few, artistic-type people. Not! The best committees thrive on creativity. They spark the imagination of an otherwise indifferent assembly by presenting social justice in a creative way. Like what? One parish passed out packets of salt to raise awareness about Communities of Salt and Light. Ribbons, to raise awareness about AIDS. Writing letters about hunger to politicians on paper plates instead of stationery.

A committee can be successful if it allows the creativity of the Holy Spirit to move in and among its work. The Spirit can challenge us to take calculated risks to get the message of social justice to our assemblies.

4. **Relational.** Successful committees are made up of people who never lose track of their relationships with parishioners at the center of the parish. They network and make connections between issues, people, and talents. An example? When working on a local environmental issue, a justice leader sought the advice of a person who worked for the DNR, a local business leader, a homeowner who lived near the site, and an outdoor enthusiast. All of these "experts" were in her parish. Nearly half of them were interested in getting more involved in the issue after she took the time to listen to their views.

The best committees seek out the average parishioners for their committees, not just the passionate activists. For the chair, this often means more time training and bringing people up-to-speed on Catholic social teaching, issues, etc. But the successful committee knows that its work is driven by its relationships with the center of the parish, not internally-focused on the committee's favorite issues.

5. **Focused on Justice.** There's pressure on committees to do lots of projects or programs. A social ministry effort can grow to include twenty or more avenues for charitable work - everything from soup kitchens to sock-mending. Successful committees avoid the tendency to let quantity become the measuring stick of how well their justice program is doing. Successful committees don't try to do everything. Instead, they focus on getting parishioners to understand the structural forces in society that keep people in poverty. Once they do that, they make the connection with scripture and how our faith calls us to live. Finally, they create simple ways for people to take action once their awareness is raised.

6. **Educating for Action.** Some of the best committees live out the idea that justice is not merely a matter of being aware of events in our world - it is taking a hand in shaping those events. They believe that conversion of heart without an action response is simply not enough. So when they teach the parish about an issue, they offer several vehicles to act right at/after the event. People are presented with options on how to respond. Some actions require more time and commitment than others.

7. **In for The Long Haul.** Shared leadership is the hallmark of a highly-successful justice committee. The leaders take the long view and are always grooming new leaders and delegating responsibilities to various members. It's very different than the way most committees bring in new members - into what I call an 'air of desperation.' You know: "Gosh, thanks for coming. We were almost extinct..." Great committees celebrate who they are and what they are doing -- and they have fun, too! The feeling new members get is more like: "We're glad you're doing justice work with us, because we think you'll find it gives you meaning and purpose in life." When we stop feeling that way about social justice work, perhaps it's time to take a rest.

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