



**Archdiocese of Newark**  
**Social Concerns Committee Guidelines**

“The growing number of marginalized people living in the situations of extreme precariousness is a fact that calls us and demands zealous solidarity to offer them the material and spiritual support they need. At the same time, we have much to receive from the poor whom we encounter and assist. In the throes of difficulty, they are often witnesses to the essential, to family, values, they are able to share with those who are poorer than them, and to rejoice in it...indifference and self-centeredness are always on the increase. Care for the poor enriches us by setting us on a path of humility and truth” Pope Francis, February 16, 2015

“We need to build local communities of faith where our social teaching is central, not fringe; where social ministry is integral, not optional; where it is the work of every believer, not just the mission of a few committed people and committees.”  
(US Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Communities of Salt and Light*)

## **Introduction**

These guidelines are meant to assist the parishes of the Archdiocese in developing and sustaining social concerns programs, both those of direct service and those of addressing injustices within our society. We want our parishes to be communities of love and service where people are cared for and the wide range of issues that affect the lives of people in our parishes and communities.

Our Archdiocese is very diverse, and our parishes reflect that diversity. However, we all share the common call to care for others and create a more just society. Each community must find the way that this can be best done in their local situation.

Parishes may use many ways to describe their social ministry efforts. For our purpose here we will refer to the parish's Social Concerns Committee. At different times and in different parishes this can include direct service, charitable outreach, social justice, education and formation around specific social issues.

Many parishes have a long history of social outreach while others are in the process of developing their programs or looking to strengthen their existing programs. It is hoped that these guidelines serve as a resource for the development of the mission of your own parish's Social Concerns Committee.

## **Catholic Social Teaching**

The US Bishops have presented these essential themes of Catholic Social Teaching:

### **1.) Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from abortion and euthanasia. The value of human life is being threatened by cloning, embryonic stem research, and the use of the death penalty. The intentional targeting of civilians in war or terrorist attacks is always wrong. Catholic teaching also calls on us to work to avoid war. Nations must protect the right to life by finding increasingly effective ways to prevent conflicts and resolve them by peaceful means. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

### **2.) Call to Family, Community, and Participation**

The person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society -- in economics and politics, in law and policy -- directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. Marriage and the family are the central social institutions that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

### 3.) Rights and Responsibilities

The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities--to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

### 4.) Option for the Poor and the Vulnerable.

A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and the vulnerable first.

### 5.) The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected--the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to the organization and joining of unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

### 6.) Solidarity

We are one human family in whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers and sisters keepers, wherever they may be. Loving our neighbor has global dimensions in a shrinking world. At the core of the virtue of solidarity is the pursuit of justice and peace. Pope Paul VI taught that if you want peace, work for justice. The Gospel calls us to be peacemakers. Our love for all our

sisters and brothers demands that we promote peace in a world surrounded by violence and conflict.

## 7.) Care For God's Creation

We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored.

## **Areas of Social Concerns Ministry**

Social Concerns programs are most beneficial when they are done in ways that respond to a variety of needs. Sometimes that will involve direct service while at other times advocacy may be called for or collaborative works with other groups and communities. Social concerns awareness should be integrated into the educational and liturgical life of the parish.

Parishes will be in different circumstances and situations as they look at the various areas of social concerns to be addressed. Social Concerns Committees may concentrate their efforts on a few areas because of limited resources and the pressing needs of the community.

The Social Concerns Committee may be involved with some or many of the following areas.

- 1.) **Direct Service:** These are activities that directly support those in need or help those working in this area. Parishes may offer their own services or encourage parishioners to volunteer in other community services. This could include food pantries, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, visits to the homebound and in nursing homes home repair, supports of refugees and immigrants and other areas of direct care.
- 2.) **Justice:** Social Justice requires us to take action and speak for the voiceless and to work for change in systems or underlying causes that put people in need of direct service. This could include advocacy efforts of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and the New Jersey Catholic Conference and joining legislative networks that produce action alerts through Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities USA.
- 3.) **Community Involvement:** Some activities are more effective when parishes join with other faith communities to address common needs. This can be seen in areas of direct service like a community wide food pantry or advocacy coalitions to address common issues.

4.) Solidarity: We are the Body of Christ and there are needs beyond our parish and communities. Examples can be working to support the programs of Catholic Relief Services, twinning with parishes overseas and welcoming new immigrants to our communities.

5.) Education and Liturgy: Education programs for adults and youth to promote social teachings of the church and to encourage participation in service and justice activities. The call to service and justice also needs to be heard in the preaching and liturgical celebrations of the parish.



## **Organization**

The Social Concerns Committee is crucial in helping the parish act on the service and social justice dimensions of the parish mission. It serves by enabling the participation of the entire parish community, not just a few individuals, do the works of justice in the parish.

**Purpose and Goals:** The initial task is to develop a sense of purpose that clarifies its reason for existing. A mission statement is developed to clarify the vision of the committee. Goals are established to provide direction and priority to efforts. Objectives are developed to identify specific action steps. Criteria are determined for assessing progress. Goals are reviewed periodically, and revisions made as goals and objectives are accomplished and to recognize efforts of the committee and parish.

**Size:** A core committee is identified for effective planning, organization and implementation of the goals of the committee. It should be small enough for efficient operation and large enough to have representation of various viewpoints and to be able to liaison with different aspects of parish life. A minimum of 5 and maximum of 12 members is suggested that provide for diversity while remaining an efficient number.

**Leadership:** Membership requires a Chairperson, a Secretary and at least 3 members. The Chairperson is appointed to the position after prayerful discernment involving the Social Concerns Committee and the Pastor. The Secretary is appointed by the Chairperson or by discernment of the committee.

**Recruitment:** The two ways to recruit people is by personal contact and by letting the Committee's needs be known by the parish. The pastoral staff and present Committee members may know people who they would like to invite to join the Committee. Bulletin or pulpit announcements may surface people who otherwise may not be known. However, new members are added it is important to offer orientation, training and development in order to prepare them for their role.

**Meetings:** Monthly meetings are recommended. If there are subcommittees around specific ministries or issues they can meet more or less often. Set meetings at times that are sensitive to people's schedules. It is important to start

and end all meetings on so that the work can be done and to show respect for people's time.

Procedure for Meeting: Conduct meetings so that input and dialogue are encouraged.

- Work with an agenda and make decisions by consensus.
- Committee members can take turns in the preparation of leadership of the prayer that begins meetings. It could include time for petitions for the needs of the community as well as scripture reflection and sharing.
- Minutes of the last meeting are reviewed to recall decisions, plans and priorities.
- Chairperson or staff member shares brief comments and insights concerning the social concerns needs and life of the parish.
- Agenda items are addressed.
- Reports are made by the liaisons of any subcommittees and any other groups or people the Social Concerns Committee collaborates with.
- A closing prayer concludes the meeting.

Evaluation: You should annually have an evaluation of the work of the Committee. When setting goals and objectives criteria should be established to assess how the work is measured.

Annual Plan: An annual plan and budget (if there is a budget) should be a regular part of the Committee's work. There should be an action plan with specific goals and objectives. How the plan is integrated to other parish goals and activities should be noted.

## **Beginning Or Reinvigorating A Social Concerns Committee**

- Receive the interest and support of your parish leadership.
- Present the concept to the Pastoral Council and receive their support.
- Form a core group of people that represents the existing service and justice groups within the parish.
- Identify other potential members from parishioners and invite them to the core team.
- Consider working as a joint committee with neighboring parishes if your parish is small, has limited resources and shares common interests with area parishes.
- Develop a mission statement that provides a vision for your group.
- Assess the needs and interests within the parish and community.
- Identify and prioritize goals and action steps.
- Isolate 1 or 2 problems or issues and reduce it to a manageable size. Develop a plan to address it.
- Be realistic about yourselves and your goals.
- As you achieve 1 goal, consider other action plans to broaden your efforts.
- Keep parish leadership and parishioners informed about the work of the Committee and invite others to join your efforts.
- Periodically evaluate your efforts and modify your goals accordingly.

## **Job Responsibilities for Committee Membership**

### Chairperson:

- Prepare the agenda.
- Schedule the meetings.
- Chair the meetings.
- Keep the meetings focused and productive.
- Arrange the prayer.
- Facilitate the planning, implementation and evaluation of Committee goals.
- Set up subcommittees as needed.
- Provide for on-going formation of the Committee.
- Prepare an annual report to the parish of Committee activities.

### Secretary:

- Take minutes or notes from meetings.
- Provide copies of the minutes and the agenda to Committee members.

### Members:

- Prepare for and attend meetings on a regular basis.
- Study Catholic Social Teaching.
- Observe the social concerns of the parish and community members.
- Share your experiences.
- Assist in the development of plans, goals and objectives.
- Offer your talents and time to accomplish the goals of the Committee.
- Volunteer to prepare and lead prayer.

The Archdiocese offers Consultation through the Social Concerns Office at 974-497-4318.

Many thanks to the Diocese of Green Bay.