

Workshop description: I'm a social justice rep, what do I do?

What is charity?

- What we give to people who are in need from our own resources.
- We give to people who ask for help.
- It is limited by what we have available.

What is social justice?

- It addresses the systemic causes of poverty.
- It is available to all people in the community who are eligible.
- Help is ongoing.
- Seeks to change structures that contribute to keeping people living in poverty.
- It takes a more holistic approach to poverty with focus on human dignity.

Why is charity alone not enough?

- Charity is too limited because it helps only those who ask and usually is not enough to help people get out of poverty.
- It fails to include an emphasis on how the individual may find ways to escape the cycle of poverty.

Discuss Social Justice activities in SSVP:

- Informal discussion about what people know so far.

Challenges to getting Social justice on meeting agenda

- People don't want to take the time.
- Leadership does not support.
- Lack of knowledge about issues.
- Members are too busy or few in number.
- Do not believe social justice should even be addressed by SSVP.

Tips for getting topic on the agenda

- Tell conference president that social justice is an agenda item the "Rule".
- Promise to be disciplined about the social justice topic (5-10 min).
- Use resources on website.
- Ask for help from national/regional SJ committee.
- Use Catholic social teachings as starting point.

Model a social justice activity:

Ask question: What is the single best way for people to get out of poverty?

Let's Talk

.... about OW and education

To integrate a short discussion into your meeting, we suggest that you choose only one or two points to talk about and that you set a time limit.

How do the points discussed apply to the neighbours you serve?

Some people think...

People on social assistance should go back to school and get an education so that they can get good jobs.

But the reality is...

Jan was a good student in grade 12 when she became pregnant with her son Michael. Her family couldn't support her and her child, so she went on Ontario Works (OW). When Michael was two years old, Jan completed her high school diploma by correspondence courses.

Jan asked her social worker about going to college to get a Registered Practical Nursing (RPN) diploma. Her worker told her that she would have to give up her OW benefits and borrow money from Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) to live on while she went to college. OW does not support people in post-secondary education. The program is five semesters long (20 months).

For living expenses, Jan would need to borrow \$28,600 (\$1340X20). The college website states that books, supplies and tuition would cost about \$23,019 for 5 semesters to get her RPN. She would have to borrow \$51,619 to pay for her education.

So now what?

- With a starting salary of \$45,500 before taxes and benefits are deducted, how long would it take Jan to pay back \$51,619 while taking care of herself and her child?
- How do you think that the government should handle OW recipients who want to get education or training?
- Would society benefit if there was more support for OW recipients to get education or training?
- Is there anything that Vincentians can do to help OW recipients get ahead?

For more information see: <https://flemingcollege.ca/programs>

Give participants copy of “Let’s talk about OW and Education”.

Give them 2-3 minutes to read and assess the information.

Ask participants if they are surprised that OW recipients must give up their benefits if they want to pursue post secondary education.

Discuss one or two of the questions at the end of the Let’s talk.

What can Vincentians do? (Possible suggestions)

- Go with prospective students to the learning institution to ask about student support available
- Help prospective student find other bursary or scholarship opportunities on the Web
- Help student apply for help from Ozanam Fund

Try it out (20 minutes)

Let participants try out presentation of a social justice moment (samples below)

- Divide group into smaller groups of 6-8 participants.
- Give each participant a resource to help them get started.
- Let students read and reflect on the content of “Let’s Talk” document.
- Presenters will coach groups as they figure out how to start a discussion.
- At the end, ask participants what they learned from the activity.
- Ask participants whether these issues are important to the people that we serve and to the community on general?

Let's Talk

... about Pharmacare

To integrate a short discussion into your meeting, we suggest that you choose only one or two points to talk about and that you set a time limit.

How do the points discussed apply to the neighbours you serve?

Some people think...

Canada's public health system provides all the important services that Canadians need.

But the reality is...

- Public health care covers the services delivered in doctors' offices and in hospitals. Prescription medications which are essential to modern health care are not covered.
- Around 10% of Canadians do fill their prescriptions because of cost or they divert money from other essential needs such as their food budget to buy meds. So they may get sicker.
- In Ontario, only seniors and those on social assistance have access to pharmacare.
- Working people who do not have access to affordable medication are often in low-wage jobs with no benefit plans. They try their best to be self-supporting but their inability to afford their medications threatens their health and their livelihoods.
- Research indicates that due to the economic efficiency of buying in bulk, pharmacare would actually reduce the overall amount that Canadians spend on medications.

So now what?

Do you think that it is time for the Canadian government to initiate a universal pharmacare program?

What steps can we take to make pharmacare a reality?

For more information see: <http://www.pharmacare2020.ca/>

Let's Talk

.... about Climate change

To integrate a short discussion into your meeting, we suggest that you choose only one or two points to talk about and that you set a time limit.

How do the points discussed apply to the neighbours you serve?

Some people think...

Climate change and destructive weather events such as devastating hurricanes, floods and wild fires are a reality that affects everyone equally.

But the reality is...

- People on low incomes usually don't have the means to escape disaster. They must wait until authorities arrange transport for them or stay where they are and take their chances. Both options are very stressful.
- People who live on low incomes don't have ready cash to buy necessities such as food, extra clothes, or personal care items that they will need in an emergency.
- People on low incomes generally do not have insurance for their possessions. When it comes time to rebuild their lives, they have access only to what governments and charities provide. The wait to get support can be very long.

So now what?

How can we as a caring community support our neighbours when disaster strikes?

How can we advocate with governments to give priority to people who are most in need when the time comes to rebuild their lives?

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/extreme-weather-hits-poorest-hardest/>

Wrap-up:

- Challenges in presenting a social justice moment include: lack of participation, people feel uncomfortable with speaking up.
- Assure participants that it is a process that will get easier.
- Benefits of having social justice on the agenda:
 - Vincentians understand suffering of neighbours in need better
 - Home visitors are more comfortable making visit because they are informed
 - Vincentians can become advocates when they understand issues better
 - Vincentians can help each other find resources to help their neighbours
- Conclude with Sabbath prayer

A Sabbath Prayer

We cannot merely pray to you, O God,
to end war;
For we know that You have made the world
in a way
That man must find his own path to peace.
Within himself and with his neighbor.
We cannot merely pray to You, O God,
to end starvation;
For You have already given us the
resources
With which to feed the entire world,
If we would only use them wisely.
We cannot merely pray to You, O God,
to root out prejudice;
For You have already given us eyes
With which to see the good in all men,
If we would only use them rightly.
We cannot merely pray to You, O God,
to end despair,
For You have already given us the power
To clear away slums and to give hope,
If we would only use our power justly.
We cannot merely pray to You, O God,
to end disease;
For You have already given us great minds
With which to search out cures and healing,
If we would only use them constructively.
Therefore we pray to You instead, O God,
For strength, determination and will power,
To do instead of just pray,
To become instead of merely to wish."

Jack Riemeer Likrat Shabbat

Give each participant a social justice kit: Poverty, Charity and Social Justice

Society of Saint Vincent de Paul Charity and social justice

Restorative justice/ Prison Ministry

Poverty, Charity and Social Justice

Poverty is the lack of enough money to supply the basic needs for a life of dignity and health.

Vincentians know very well that there are people in our communities who live in severe poverty. We serve people whose incomes are sometimes less than 50% of the poverty line. It doesn't matter where you live in Canada. Research conducted by the National Council of Welfare which analysed welfare incomes for all the provinces and territories showed that there was not much difference across the country. It is generally accepted that 1 in 7 Canadians lives in poverty.

Among other things, people who live in poverty struggle to pay the rent, buy nutritious food, pay utilities, get transportation and clothe themselves and their children. The constant stress of surviving takes a heavy toll on their lives and causes mental and physical illness. They cannot attain the education to get job skills for employment and their children also struggle in school and so poverty becomes a generational issue. The strain of poverty makes it impossible for people to participate in the economic, social and cultural life of the community because they have neither the means nor the energy to do so.

Charity addresses an immediate need while **justice** gets to the root of the problem.

Charity is usually given by individuals or groups to people who have asked for help. Vincentians serve the people who call the SSVP and they give them as much charity as their resources (money or goods) make possible. Charity can never be enough to meet the needs of people who live in deep poverty so that they can live with good health and dignity. Another problem with charity is that it fails to reach the many people who do not access organizations that provide charitable help.

Social justice ensures that all citizens in a society have a sufficient share of the community's resources to enable good health, dignity and opportunities to participate meaningfully in society. Social justice rights include, but are not limited to, the right to an adequate standard of living, including access to safe, secure and affordable housing, health care, education, social security and labor rights.

Social programs are the way that progressive countries provide support to their less fortunate citizens. Social programs are available to all the citizens in the community and are achieved through the delivery of services funded by the community's resource base, usually taxes. In a progressive society, social programs are sufficient to provide a life of dignity and health to most of its citizens. When these programs fall short of the community's potential to provide support, advocacy is needed to improve social programs so that more will have dignity and health.

Our goal as Vincentians is to provide charity to alleviate the poverty of *our neighbours in need* while working for justice to ensure them meaningful opportunities to participate in society

Society of Saint Vincent de Paul: Charity and Social Justice

The society of Saint Vincent de Paul provides charity to people living in poverty and helps them to achieve dignity, health and where possible self-sufficiency. The Society does this through three identified initiatives: systemic change, advocacy and restorative justice.

Systemic Change: Vincentians work with their *neighbours* to identify the barriers that keep them in poverty and to help them find ways to remove them. The critical element in Systemic Change is that the *neighbour* is at the centre of the process and directs any action, taken on their behalf. That means that Vincentians have to ask what the person needs, sometimes in different ways and often over time to get at the best answer because our *neighbours* may need time to clarify and identify appropriate solutions. The Vincentian then becomes the assistant in finding solutions to the problems.

Vincentians used to believe that everyone could escape poverty and become self-sufficient. However, we must accept that there are *neighbours* who because of health, age or disability will not be able to become self-sufficient. They also deserve to live in dignity and good health and we help them to access supports that will improve the quality of their lives.

There are issues that are common to many people who live in deep poverty and there are community programs which can help alleviate that poverty.

Employment: Many people would like to have a secure job that lets them be self-sufficient. Barriers to achieving this could include lack of job skills or knowledge of how to find job opportunities.

Solutions could include: helping *neighbours* get higher education, find job skill training, find job placement agencies, or teaching them how to navigate the internet. There are many resources in the community and Vincentians can help their *neighbours* find what they need.

Low wages and social assistance programs don't provide enough money for safe and secure housing. Social housing and rent supplements can help people who are spending their food money on rent. Many municipalities have programs to help people cope with the cost of shelter and Vincentians can help access these supports.

Health issues are common among people living in poverty. Sometimes, *neighbours* cannot afford their medications, dental care or vision care. Vincentians can find out what is available and help *neighbours* access the services that they need.

There are many other needs such as transportation, access to recreation for children and basic needs such as clothing and household goods. Vincentians can help their *neighbours* meet these needs.

Systemic change is an important part of Vincentian work.

Advocacy: As we work with our *neighbours* to help them to achieve dignity, better health and more material comfort, we often come to understand that some of our systems are inadequate for meeting the goal of a just society. The supports are insufficient and reach too few people. Many *neighbours* are left out due to lack of knowledge or lack of people to help them.

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is building a network of social justice reps who work to identify issues and help others to advocate with the proper authorities to improve social programs.

In social justice and advocacy voices count. The more voices that speak up for a cause, the more likely it will encourage decision makers (politicians and bureaucrats) and other members of the community to pay attention and act on an issue. Social justice discussions at conference and council meetings are an important way for us to learn about poverty issues and build support for advocacy initiatives. It is beneficial to find out who else in your community is involved in anti-poverty work and join forces with them in the common goal of making our communities better for everyone.

The issues which you discuss can come from experiences that you have with your *neighbours*. As they tell about their problems, you can learn about the systemic issues that entrap them in poverty. For example, the income levels that people receive on social assistance are so far below the poverty line that no-one could live in health and dignity. When *neighbours* live in extreme poverty, other problems develop such as serious illnesses due to stress or malnutrition. *Neighbours* are so weakened by deprivation that they do not have the energy to find work or attend to their relationships. Sadly, conflict with the law also seems to go with a life of poverty. All these issues cost society more than providing reasonable incomes to people in need.

Other sources of information about poverty issues can come from newspapers, television or radio documentaries or the Ontario Region website of the Society. The ONRC materials were developed in Ontario but the issues are similar across Canada and can usually be adapted.

Poverty is a complex issue and the solutions will often involve multiple levels of government. For example, the provision of affordable housing, when it works, requires the cooperation of municipal, provincial / territorial and federal governments. Liveable incomes and health care programs also involve multiple levels of government.

For sure, getting involved with advocacy is a daunting task because it is complex and often progress is painfully slow. However, The Rule (Section 3:22) states “The Society helps those in need to speak for themselves. When they cannot the Society must speak on their behalf so they will not be ignored.”

Likewise, Catholic Social Teaching promotes “A preferential option for the poor” calling us to put the needs of the poor first. By advocating for the powerless and those in need, we will benefit the common good that is all of society. We are called to act!

Restorative Justice /Prison Ministry

Restorative Justice and Prison Ministry are included under our national social justice committee as there is little doubt these two topics are ones that call out for justice and advocacy. The victims of crime can also be extended to the families of both the actual victim and his/her family to the family of the offender. Indeed, we must remember that the offender also deserves our attention and love. If Vincentians can reach out to inmates and those who have served their sentence (returning citizens) we could develop a personal relationship with them which may very well prevent them from re offending and returning to prison.

There are several initiatives across Canada where Vincentians visit inmates in prison to offer various kinds of both spiritual and practical help in a friendly and respectful manner. In addition, we also provide help upon release from prison as the returning citizens faces the many challenges of trying to return to society and some form of normal life. These challenges often include addictions and mental health issues. If we can provide the same level of love and caring to these new friends which we offer to those living in poverty whom we work with every day, we can provide a much-needed support system.

There are certainly issues related to the criminal justice system in which we can and should advocate for needed change. One of these issues relates to the criminal justice system and Indigenous people. There is a disproportionately higher number of Indigenous people in the prison system which needs to be addressed. The issue of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) is another one that we should be concerned about.

Our national social justice committee would like to encourage our members to consider becoming involved in restorative justice and/or prison ministry in your community. We can provide resource material and information about currently active programs as well as support for any plans you may have for a project. If you have an interest in learning more, please contact Jim Paddon at jpsvvp@hotmail.ca