

I'm the New Social Justice Rep for BC and Yukon... Now What?

A few months ago my name was put forward to be the new Social Justice rep for BC and Yukon. I fully admitted that I didn't know much about social justice but I'd be willing to take a huge leap of faith and say YES - so here I am!

Papal documentation of the importance of social justice dates back to Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 which stressed the dignity of every human person as well as the common good. Each pope, since, and up to Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudate Si*, has written about social justice, laying the foundation of what is **The Social Doctrine of the Church**.

At the BC and Yukon Regional SSVP AGA in May 2019, the importance of social justice as part of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul mandate will be put forward. The expected result is that social justice will become a Rule; that is every conference will be required to have social justice on their regular agenda.

Each conference is encouraged to have a Social Justice rep. What if no one comes forward in your conference to be the Social Justice rep? I would suggest that the President take on the role with the hope that another member will come forward in the near future.

What if you don't know what to have on your agenda? We have to start with education so possibly read and/or discuss an article of interest. There is a wealth of information available to you. I would encourage every conference member to subscribe to the *Vincenpaul* newsletter and the Social Justice Newsletter, *Changing Times* (available on the www.ssvp.ca website - just give your e-mail and you're signed up!)

The words 'social justice' might seem rather daunting to many. Helping the poor and responding to their needs is traditionally what our Society of Saint Vincent de Paul members do. Now the challenge is to go beyond putting together hampers, making sandwiches for the poor, etc. How do we do this? A first step could be listening to the needs of those we interact with during our home visits and/or in our community. Once issues surface, we can try to devise a strategy of action

Our St. Luke's (Maple Ridge, BC) Conference is in its third year of having a Social Justice rep and including social justice on our agendas. It was a rather slow process to get everyone on board. We certainly heard grumbings of 'Why?' and 'Now the meetings are longer'. Our only goal the first year was 'information gathering'. Only a few members were inspired right from the start to explore the possibilities. We went online to research social justice in an effort to educate ourselves. We became aware of issues in our community. Within a few months, we chose to respond to a need of our local homeless tent city by providing water on a daily basis. We later joined forces with a United Church group to prepare packages with useful items and treats in them. When delivered we also visited with the people. These were our first concrete steps to put learning into action. The following year our conference chose 'Senior Loneliness and Isolation' as a focus. Throughout the year we drove shuttles to mass and church events, shopping, doctor appointments and recreational outings. We also reached out to local migrant farm workers. We assisted at our parish's monthly Spanish mass followed by a meal and fellowship. We donated food, clothing and sundry items for the farmers to take back to their farms with them.

The key to success for new endeavours is communication. For me, sharing is a very powerful tool for motivation. I feel inspired when hearing what others are doing as this gives new information and ideas for possibilities. I plan to reach out to BC and Yukon conference presidents a few times a year with an opportunity to share their successes and also their concerns. For those wishing to participate, comments from the various conferences will be shared with one another.

In conclusion, like myself, you might not know a lot about social justice. Be patient; it's a gradual learning process. Over time, one thing will lead to another and you will start to see results. What I know for certain is that adding a social justice component has enriched our Conference greatly – as it will yours. As stated in the February issue of *Vincenpaul*, we are encouraged to 'try some new types of Vincentian works' in our efforts to speak up with, or where needed, on behalf of those we help. I look forward to a year whereby, Canada-wide, the overall work done by the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul reaches out into new directions to serve Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice and joy.

Johanna Cross

Social Justice rep, BC and Yukon