

6. The practicalities and practice of starting a group

(You may find it helpful to read the Local Churches Review Section before this)

Where and how on earth do we start? The answer is going to be different for everyone. You may have ideas of exactly what you want to do. On the other hand, you may see the world's problems as all too overwhelming and may be uncertain as to where to start. One very natural option is to get together with others who share your vision and would like to work together. What follows are some ideas which you may find useful to starting a group.



- Remember that, in working with J&P issues, how you work (the process) is as important as what you do (action). The way in which the members of a group share the work together and encourage each other should reflect the values which we are working towards.
- If you have an idea about a J&P issue for which there is no active forum already existing in the parish, your first step should be to talk to the parish priest or minister. If they feel able to offer support and encouragement to such a venture, it will be of immeasurable benefit, because they may well have access to information and advice that would assist the group.
- Do you know of others who share your concerns? The best way is by one-to-one informal conversations with friends either in your own church community or with those from another community in your neighbourhood, to see if you can make good contacts from the outset. Or how about an item in the parish newsletter inviting discussion? But don't worry about numbers. Three or four committed people working together can make an enormous impact.
- Try to identify one or more J&P issues on which they feel as strongly as you, and what makes them angry. Discuss what resources you have and could share and what sort of action you would all be able to unite around. Reflection and action are both necessary aspects of the work of the group if this is to be successful.
- Always be ready to involve the parish as a whole in what you are doing, rather than becoming an exclusive group. Even though they may not normally be active in what you are doing, it is important that all parishioners should 'own' your activities. Discuss with others whether they in turn know of anyone who might like to join you.
- There are always many opportunities for action, but don't feel guilty if you can't get enthusiastic about every issue that others want to campaign on. Groups don't have to adopt every single J&P issue. In fact some of the most successful J&P groups are established specifically as 'umbrella' groups, within which single-issue groups meet and find a welcome and mutual support. Loyal commitment to a limited number of specific concerns is of immense value, not only to those on behalf of whom you are campaigning, but also to the effectiveness of the J&P group as a whole. Invariably, individual J&P issues link up with a wide range of other issues, revealing new perspectives on them and deepening everyone's understanding of all of them.
- Keep yourself up to date by ensuring that you are receiving mailings from specialised organisations, such as CAFOD or Christian Aid, working in the chosen field(s) of interest.

■ Look out for opportunities to work with other groups and to work ecumenically if you can. There is a growing tradition of groups successfully uniting around social issues, J&P issues, on a local and national basis. Who can forget the impact of the MAKEPOVERTYHISTORY Campaign in 2005 – itself a coming together of small groups into an international movement, side by side with an international event like Live 8? But working with others demands sensitivity, restraint and humility on some occasions, and enthusiasm, a dynamic vision and leadership on others. Reconcile differences of opinion and don't let them overwhelm the group. Well-laid foundations, built by steady progress, lead to a growth in confidence and understanding in the group that can transform the impact of future shared projects.

■ Some parishes have found it useful to launch their group by hosting an open meeting, addressed by an expert from an organisation working in a particular field to speak about it, or to speak generally on social justice issues, or about the spiritual principles underlying such concern and to lead a discussion of them. The parish could perhaps be invited to such a meeting by a few words during the Sunday service from a fieldworker who works on the issues in question. In fact, the Church's liturgical calendar offers good links throughout the year to J&P issues (see for example: www.london.anglican.org/socialjustice and www.rcdow.org.uk/justice and www.rcdow.org.uk/peace/events).

■ When you are planning an event, remember to estimate how many people you expect to attend and choose an appropriate venue - preferably without the need to hire one. Choose speakers who are well known in your area or acknowledged experts in their fields, and confirm all bookings in writing with them, including a synopsis of the event so that they know exactly what is expected of them. Think about publicity practicalities well in advance and ensure that such publicity is in place at least 2 weeks before the event, in the local press, the newsletters of all local parishes, flyers in libraries, local notice-boards, perhaps a banner in a prominent public place. Can other local pressure groups be interested to come to the venue on the day of the event and display their materials? Share the responsibilities of setting up the venue, providing refreshments (free? or for a contribution?), welcoming the speakers and the audience, arranging the visual aids and amplification if necessary, chairing the meeting, organising a photographer and someone to prepare a short report of the event for the local press, and then tidying up afterwards and writing to thank the speakers.

■ Don't despair if your efforts seem to be having little impact. This can be one of the unexpected practical realities of J&P life. Sometimes it takes a while for a group to identify issues that command wholehearted commitment from all its members. Reflect together as a group on the successes of any event, and discuss what did not go so well, so as to learn to improve future events. What improvements could be made? How can the event be followed up? Could it lead on to something else? Take heart from the lack of success of the early Christians in spreading the Good News of the Gospel and the encouragement found in the Acts of the Apostles! Remember that the results of your efforts may be being felt with far greater impact in other, needier, parts of the world than at home!

■ 'Stickability' is a fundamental virtue in this field, as in many others. Enjoy the strength of new-found solidarity with others. Be happy if you have raised awareness about an issue, however large or small the audience, however large or small the dent in the wall – it may have weakened the structures of injustice more than you realise!