

Seeds of Justice

Sowers of Justice Newsletter

DECEMBER, 2000

Inside this Issue

ADVENT REFLECTIONS..... 1

PUBLIC POLICY
Welfare Time Limits
Waste Our Investments..... 3

ACTING FOR JUSTICE
People and Parishes
at Work..... 4

SKILLS FOR PUBLIC LIFE
Beyond the Giving Tree..... 6

2001 LEGISLATIVE EVENTS..... 7

MARK YOUR CALENDARS 8

ADVENT REFLECTIONS ON BECOMING INCARNATIONAL CHRISTIANS

Incarnation. To become flesh. To assume human form. That's what God did, and that's why we celebrate Christmas. But sometimes I think we lose sight of the radical meaning of this Incarnation. What does it mean for us and for our church when we profess to believe in a God who entered and is present in the world, in the flesh, in concrete form?

When Christ was born in a lowly manger, God became one of us. Christ entered human history in the flesh. He lived and walked among us. He taught us the meaning of life, and he did so in the midst of the world.

This has implications for our faith that are very different from the old dualism that has too often characterized our understanding of faith and spirituality. This dualism implied that body and spirit, secular and sacred, were sharply separated. Spirituality referred only to those things which were viewed as explicitly sacred or spiritual, such as prayer and liturgy. All else was considered secular, profane.

There is something very tempting about this approach. It neatly categorizes life for us and locates the search for holiness in a confined arena called religion. Sometimes it is even confined to the church building itself.

This Advent season, as we prepare to celebrate the Incarnation, we should remind ourselves how wrong that dualistic approach is. The birth of Jesus should be

an occasion for reflecting on the worldly nature of our faith. For ours is a faith that seeks Christ incarnate, in the world, not apart from the world.

It seeks holiness in the midst of human history, with all of its messiness and imperfections. It pursues meaning and salvation in the institutions and relationships of everyday life, not in some isolated setting removed from the world.

The Second Vatican Council helped us to understand this idea of incarnational faith when it spoke about the relationship between the Church and the world. In the document entitled *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council says "this split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.... "

In a similar vein, the U.S. bishops wrote in their 1986 pastoral letter on the economy that "faith is not just a week-end obligation, a mystery to be celebrated around the altar on Sunday. It is a pervasive reality to be practiced every day in homes, offices, factories, schools, and businesses across our land. We cannot separate what we



(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

believe from how we act in the market place and the broader community."

I would suggest that incarnational Christians, those who are committed to engaging and transforming an imperfect, messy world, have certain behavioral characteristics that flow from their incarnational stance. Let me suggest just a few.

Incarnational Christians are pragmatic. They sometimes settle for



"better" when "perfect" is not attainable. For example, we know that Third World debt relief requires billions of dollars. When the U.S. Congress recently agreed to allocate \$435 million for debt relief, we know that this a relatively small amount in the big picture, but we also know that it's a big step forward. It's far more than the \$70 million that Congress was proposing just a few weeks earlier. We rejoice in the fact that this success was due, in large part, to the hard work and organizing of churches and religious organizations.

Secondly, incarnational Christians are pluralists, not purists, when it comes to working with others. They form coalitions and partnerships to work on specific issues or causes, knowing full well that their partners do not necessarily agree with them on everything. Pluralists can identify

joint strategies and common interests on some issues, without having to agree on all issues.

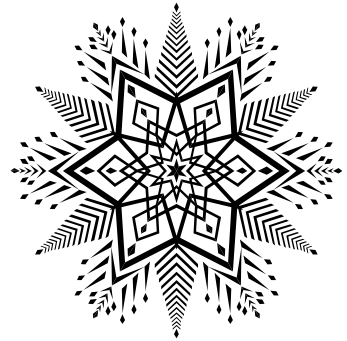
For example, we Catholics work to abolish the death penalty by joining coalitions and alliances with other religious and community organizations, many of whom have serious policy disagreements with us on other issues.

Thirdly, incarnational Christians are patient, long-distance runners. They know that seeking justice in a messy, imperfect world means that there are no simplistic quick fixes. Progress comes slowly, sometimes even invisibly, and it is usually complex. Incarnational Christians embrace this complexity, rejoice in modest victories, and nurture a sense of hope for the long journey.

For example, we might be in favor of a national health care system that would guarantee universal coverage, but in the short term we know that this is not a realistic goal. So we take what we can get – we work for incremental reforms to expand coverage for children, or improve prescription drug coverage for seniors.

Finally, incarnational Christians are whole. They are people of integrity. They hold a set of core beliefs that guide their lives in an integrated way – from their private actions and decisions to their public choices and positions. Their family life, work life, and civic life – all are seen as opportunities for defending human dignity and advancing social justice.

As we embrace the season of Advent, perhaps we can all make an extra effort to be incarnational Christians. Perhaps we can all commit ourselves to make Sowers of Justice a better instrument of that Incarnation.



Ron Krietemeyer

Welfare Time Limits Waste Our Investments

When the federal government passed the Welfare Reform Bill in 1996 it included a maximum 60 month time limit. While states were offered the option of shorter time limits, Minnesota chose the maximum five years. But the time limits expire for some families in the not too distant future. Approximately 7,000 of the 42,000 households on welfare become ineligible for benefits beginning in July 2002.

The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) allows welfare recipients in Minnesota to remain on the program until their 60 month time limit expires or until they earn up to 120% of the poverty level (\$16,980 for a family of 3).

Rewarding and supporting work are important components of the MFIP program. It is a recognition that families need to be supported while they make the transition to work. They are rewarded by allowing a combination of cash grants and wages.

For those who believe that this economy will create the wages necessary to lift a family out of poverty, 60 months may seem like a long time. But there are many reasons to question the wisdom of expecting that all welfare recipients will be able to earn wages sufficient to meet their basic needs in the same time frame.

There are also reasons to question the wisdom of investing in a family for five years only to pull the rug out from under them at some arbitrary deadline. Reports from counties and the state indicate that over 90% of the families on welfare are pulling their weight by implementing their employ-

ment plan but still are not earning enough to support their families.

Why then would the state not continue to support and reward families past the 60 month time limit?

Among the arguments against extending the time limit are:

- ◆ The state set a time limit that must be adhered to. Changing the rules mid-stream will be confusing.
- ◆ There are many jobs available in this economy. If recipients can't make it in this economy it is not the state's responsibility to pick up the pieces.
- ◆ Extending the time limits will end up costing the state lots of money.

The arguments for extending the time limit, on the other hand, are:

- ◆ Families on MFIP are not all alike; they will not achieve self sufficiency at the same pace.
- ◆ Language barriers, learning disabilities, mental health issues and other obstacles will keep people from working full time at wages sufficient to raise a family.
- ◆ Most families on MFIP use their cash grant for housing costs. If they become ineligible for cash assistance, homelessness will increase.

The 2001 legislature will decide whether we, as a state, will continue our investment in these families or throw that investment away.

There is a moral argument to be made about the responsibility we have toward one another, but there is also a practical one. It seems shortsighted and arbitrary to just give up on people because the calendar turns to July 2002.

Kathleen Tomlin



People and Parishes at Work

Sowers of Justice parishes in Ramsey County have been busy trying to get their County Commissioners to make commitments to affordable housing. Last spring, County Commissioner Susan Haigh proposed an affordable housing incentive fund to provide gap financing for developers interested in building affordable rental housing. Since Haigh proposed the housing incentive fund, Sowers members have done a number of things to secure the support of their commissioners.



On October 26, Sowers from **St. Luke's, Nativity of Our Lord, Holy Spirit,** and **St. Matthew's** in Saint Paul met with Commissioner Raphael Ortega, the chair of the County Commissioners. Commissioner Ortega refused to make a commitment to support the Affordable Housing Incentive Fund. Instead, he promised to offer his own proposal, though he offered few details, and he refused to make any commitments regarding when his plan would be released. When pressed, Commissioner Ortega also refused to try to reconcile his proposal with Commissioner Haigh's. He also told Sowers that they could do nothing to change his position. The Sowers who participated in the meeting vowed to schedule a follow up meeting with Commissioner Ortega to hold him to his promise to put forward another proposal for an affordable housing fund.



Sowers of Justice at **Saint Odilia's** in Shoreview also met with their Commissioner, Tony Bennett.

Joining with members of other faith communities, they asked Commissioner Bennett to commit to the incentive fund. Commissioner Bennett could not pledge his support, but vowed that a better plan would be brought before the Commission.

The County Commissioners are slated to vote on the Affordable Housing Incentive Fund Tuesday, November 28.



Sowers involved in the West Metro Faith Communities in Action campaign remain busy. After successfully sponsoring two candidate's forums prior to the election, members of the campaign convened to begin working with legislators in preparation for the 2001 session. At a November 16 training, state representative Jim Rhodes and state representative Betty Folliard spoke with leaders about effective strategies for building relationships with legislators. Afterward, participants in the campaign planned several meetings with state legislators to share their concerns regarding affordable housing, welfare time limits, day care, and transportation. In November and December, they will hold these meetings in various congregations in the west metro suburbs.



Sowers at **Guardian Angels**, in Oakdale, held one of the most successful recruitment weekends in Sowers of Justice history. Sixty-one households joined the network in just one weekend! Barb Prokop, Marla Simmet, Pam Lanz, and staff



*Congratulations to
Guardian Angels
for recruiting 61 families
into Sowers of Justice.*

*We look forward to reading
more about the work of
this new Sowers parish!*

Parishes at work (continued)

member Judy Scheider spent several weeks visiting with different committees in the parish, explaining the work of Sowers. They invited key leadership to join the network. Those leaders also agreed to wear buttons that read, "Sow What" in the weeks prior to the kickoff. The leadership team also personally invited the families they knew in the parish. Many of those who joined in September knew at least one member of the team personally.

Since the successful kickoff, the new members have met to prioritize issues; several attended the Sowers Fall Membership Assembly; and a team of members has already committed to attending the Sowers Social Justice Training Institute. Expect big things from this parish in the weeks and months to come!

Matt Gladue



The **Church of St. Michael** in Prior Lake gathered people from the parish and the larger community for a forum on affordable housing in November. With guidance from the Office for Social Justice staff, members of the Justice Education Committee conducted interviews with people from business, education, government and the social service sectors of the Prior Lake community over a period of many months.

As they pieced together the picture on affordable housing in their community, they put together a well-structured format designed to educate and activate the parish. Michael Griffin from OSJ preached at all the

masses and the committee made personal invitations to many in the parish to promote the event.

The panel included the superintendent of the Prior Lake School District. He discussed the fact that nearly 1/3 of their teachers have been hired in recent years because of the growth. Many of these teachers cannot afford to live in the community. He also discussed the changing face of the community in light of 17 different languages now being part of the district.

Also on the panel was a staff person from the HRA, a senior citizen on the verge of having to leave the community if she had not found affordable housing. Rounding out the panel was a single mother of three who found it necessary to leave because no housing was available. The president of a local bank was unable to attend at the last minute but his interests were shared with the group.

The committee also secured the attendance and participation of a member of the city council, two township supervisors, a county commissioner, and the state senator from the area. All expressed interest in continuing to work with the committee and others to find solutions to the acknowledged difficulty with affordable housing.

Members are now working on plans for the next steps. They are excited about the response from the parish and community. They were pleased to have put these first steps in motion and stressed how important it was to meet with decision makers in the community.

Michael Griffin

Groups of Sowers members from around the network have set up appointments with their recently elected state senators and representatives during the month of December.

These groups are making connections before the session begins and introducing their concerns around housing and time limits related to welfare reform. They are also reminding elected officials that the Sowers members will be following these and other issues closely during the session.

Any group or individuals who have met with state officials are urged to contact OSJ to share the findings of their meetings.

Michael Griffin

Beyond the Giving Tree

If the poinsettia is the most popular plant in a Catholic parish at Christmas time, the second most popular plant is the holiday giving tree. There is probably one in your parish, and you could go to church next Sunday and select the name of a family for whom you would purchase gifts or food.

When we choose names from a giving tree, we are doing good works. As we go about these good works, however, it is incumbent upon us to ask ourselves hard reflection questions.

- 4 How will these gifts, given anonymously, transform the life of the family who will receive them?
- 4 How does this act ensure that this family will be able to afford its own Christmas next year?

Advent is the season when we are urged to prepare the way of the Lord.

- 4 How does this act help address the social conditions obstructing the path of the Lord?
- 4 How does this act preach the good news of justice in my parish and community?

Of course, we do the work of justice all year long, and many of us see Christmas as a time to retreat from the public arena in favor of spending time with our families. Cooking, cleaning, shopping and preparing for the holidays becomes for some a kind of second full time job. Still, Christmas is no time to forget the words of Pope Pius XI: "Let no one attempt with trifling charitable donations to exempt themselves from the great duties imposed by justice."

African-Americans who participated in the civil rights movement knew

that the holidays were, in fact, a time when they could accomplish a great deal. In a number of different cities throughout the South, they launched Christmas and Easter boycotts of department stores that often led business leaders to negotiate settlements with leaders in the black community.

These dedicated *sowers of justice* knew that collectively, they had the economic power to cut into the profits of department stores and other local businesses.

Of course, times have changed. Waging boycotts in a globalized economy is tricky business. It is often difficult to discern who owns the companies that use sweat shop labor, for example. Once we identify the owners, they might have their headquarters half way around the world.

Still, there are some who will spend this holiday flexing their power as consumers in an effort to challenge the way some corporations do business. The Resource Center of the Americas will sponsor a number of holiday actions aimed at Kohl's department stores. In Nicaragua, workers who sew jeans for Kohls currently receive twenty cents for each thirty dollar pair of jeans they produce. They work in substandard conditions, and attempts to organize workers have resulted in harsh reprisals from employers.

Those who participate in these actions will not be encouraging boycotts. Their efforts are nevertheless aimed at using the holiday season to do the work of justice. They will be part of the process of preparing the way of the Lord. If you are interested in learning more about these actions, contact Larry Weiss at 612-276-0788, extension 19.

Matthew Gladue



Legislative Briefings

Wayzata Community Church
Ferndale and Wayzata Boulevard
Wayzata, MN 55391
(952) 473-8876

Nativity
9900 Lyndale Avenue South
Bloomington, MN 55420
(952) 881-8671

Guardian Angels
8260 Hudson Blvd. North
Oakdale, MN 55128
(651) 738-2223
www.guardian-angels.org



January 31, 2001 at NOON—Save the Date

Join Sowers of Justice members and others from around the state to increase the visibility of the issue of affordable housing. Details of the event will follow as the session unfolds.

February 10, 2001 — 9:00 to 1:00 a.m.

Third Annual Sowers Capitol Bus Tour

Are you new to legislative advocacy? Haven't been to the capitol since a tour in 6th grade? Then join us for a chance to tour the capitol and state offices to strengthen your legislative advocacy skills. Prayer and a mini issues briefing will take place before we board buses for the tour.

February 17, 2001 — 9:00 to 1:00 a.m.

Joint Religious Legislative Coalition (JRLC) Day on the Hill
RiverCentre, Saint Paul

This annual event brings together members of the faith community from across denominations and the state. Prayer, a keynote, issue briefings and advocacy skill sessions will be the agenda for the morning. The afternoon time is set aside for appointments with legislators. A rally in the capitol rotunda closes out the day.

For more information on any of these listed events call Michael Griffin at the

Office for Social Justice
651-291-4490





*Sow for yourselves justice,
reap the fruit of faithful love;*

*Break up for yourselves
a new field, for it is
time to seek the Lord,
until the Lord comes
and rains down justice
upon you.*

Hosea, 10:12

Office for Social Justice
328 West Kellogg Blvd.
St. Paul, MN 55102

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Paul, Minn.
Permit No. 6085

Sowers Institute for Social Justice

Here's a great opportunity to get an introduction to Catholic social teaching and to learn some of the basic skills of social action.

This training institute is primarily for teams of Sowers members. So join with other members from your parish and sign up as a team.

Topics will include:

- ◆ Intro to Catholic Social Teaching
- ◆ Moving from Charity to Justice
- ◆ How to be an Effective Legislative Advocate
- ◆ Everyday Christianity: Social Justice in Family Life, Work Life, and Civic Life
- ◆ Turning Problems into Winnable Issues

Four Training Institute Dates:

- ◆ January 29, 2001
6:30 to 9:00 p.m.
Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis
- ◆ February 12, 2001
6:30 to 9:00 p.m.
Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis
- ◆ March 5, 2001
6:30 to 9:00 p.m.
St. Peter Claver in Saint Paul
- ◆ March 19, 2001
6:30 to 9:00 p.m.
St. Peter Claver in Saint Paul

Call OSJ if you did not receive a brochure,