

# Parish Ministry to the Poor

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**This essay is a reflection based on the author's experience as a pastor. Building upon the U.S. bishops' statement on parish social ministry, he provides both the assumptions he has held and the action guidelines he has followed in developing the social mission of two parishes.**

In November 1993 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) issued a statement directed to Catholic parishes in the United States. The statement is entitled *Communities of Salt and Light: Reflections on the Social Mission of the Parish*. The bishops admit that theirs is not a new message, but one that takes on great urgency in the light of the declining respect for human life and human dignity in our society. They speak across the boundaries to urban, suburban and rural parishes. "The pursuit of justice and peace," the bishops say, "is an essential part of what makes a parish Catholic" (NCCB, 2). Ever since I read the document, I have encouraged others to read the bishops' letter in its entirety. In many ways, it is a charter for Catholic parish life, integrating worship, faith formation, and evangelization with social outreach. Even though it is eight years old, it remains relevant, especially in light of September 11 and the events we are living out as a nation and a Church.

My focus in this essay is on one parish model for social outreach to the poor, which takes its theological starting point from *Communities of Salt and Life*. That theological starting point grounds the social outreach of the parish in Jesus' reading of the passage from Isaiah, recorded in Luke's Gospel, bringing "good news to the poor, liberty to captives, new sight to the blind, and setting the

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downtrodden free” (Luke 4:18). Our parish communities, the bishops say, are measured by how they serve “the least of these” (NCCB, 3).

The bishops admit that their statement is not a “specific model” for how social outreach to the poor is accomplished. They encourage local parish commitment and creativity in social ministry. I hope to show how two local parishes where I have served as pastor have made that commitment to social ministry to the poor and downtrodden in both a creative and imaginative way. They exemplify one specific model for implementing the call of the bishops to parishes to be communities of salt and light, serving the poor. And by the poor I mean those who have neither money nor power. I mean the homeless, the alien, the unemployed, those without a living wage, those who are victims of unjust structures, refugees, and those without a voice. In many instances, the victims are women and children. These poor may be next door, down the street, in one’s own or another city, in a country geographically distant. A parish’s mission is to serve these poor—all of them. How one does this is limited only by his or her imagination and creative impulses.

### *Assumptions*

The following assumptions were the starting point for the pastoral leadership in the two model parishes as that leadership sought to enable the parishioners to serve the poor. I would claim that they are assumptions every parish should make on its journey to be a community of salt and light.

*Serving the poor is not an option for a parish.* A parish that turns in on itself sooner or later implodes. If it manages to limp along it is not worth its salt. People soon discover that “nothing’s going on” in such a parish and they are more than likely to leave. If they stay, then the parish is more an obstacle to their faith than a resource for it. Every parish that has a creative imagination for serving the poor asks the question, both in its Mission Statement, as well as its lived awareness of itself: “How can we serve?” That is the baptismal question. And to serve, for our purposes, means to serve the poor. It will include serving others, of course, e.g., those preparing for marriage, but if it does not include the poor then it does not fulfill its baptismal call to discipleship. How could one possibly read the New Testament and conclude otherwise?

*The poor are not only those poor within one’s parish.* One sometimes hears from some wealthy suburban parishes that they have poor people too. There are people who hurt, people who are victims of broken relationships, families with troubled teens, etc. Indeed! But these people are poor by extension of the word. They are the poor with power. Wealthy parishes are obliged to serve the poor outside their parishes if they are to fulfill the gospel imperative.

*Each person in the parish can be convinced, with proper catechesis and example, that it's his or her responsibility to serve the poor, not a responsibility left to a committee, the diocese, or the parish.*

*Issues like "poverty," "homelessness," "unemployment," "drug abuse," "domestic violence," "human rights," are not paralyzing if they are confronted one step at a time, one person at a time. There are too many homilies that call people to care for the homeless; too few parishes that show their parishioners how to serve the homeless. "What can I do about poverty?" asked one parishioner. "Lots," I said. "Come to next Thursday evening's meeting on neighborhood enhancement and you'll find out." If such a meeting is not being held, it is the responsibility of the parish team to show him or her how to do something about poverty.*

*A parish budget is a theological statement. At least ten percent of a parish's budget should be directed to the poor. I was invited to give a presentation to a large suburban parish in which some members were struggling to form a Social Concerns Committee. I mentioned this point of a parish tithing its income. One parishioner intervened and said, "Problems aren't solved by throwing money at them." "True enough," I said, "but tell me how your family spends its money and I will tell you what you consider important. It is the same with a parish. Taking care of self is important penultimately. Taking care of the poor is important ultimately. A parish that tithes its income, and gives its parishioners the responsibility for dispersing that tithe, fulfills the gospel mandate just as your household does."*

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## *Two Parishes*

**I**n 1985 St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Raleigh, North Carolina, had eight hundred households. It was situated on farmland in North Raleigh. Today it is a parish of thirty-eight hundred households. In 1985 its social outreach to the poor was minimal, composed of a few programs at Thanksgiving and Christmas to provide food or toys to families and children. There was not a Social Concerns Committee. Today literally hundreds of parishioners are involved in touching the lives of the poor. They cooperate with other churches and organizations in leveraging their resources to provide affordable housing, fund and staff a food coop, and develop linkage with *Las Margaritas*, a small rural community in northern Guatemala. The Mission Statement of St. Francis of Assisi Parish includes: "We reach out in a special way to those who hunger and thirst for human dignity: the poor, suffering and oppressed people in our community and in our

world.” Last year St. Francis of Assisi Parish was named one of the Catholic parishes in the United States that excel (Wilkes). Many are convinced that the social outreach of the parish, to a large extent, has been responsible for the physical and spiritual growth of the parish.

In 1995, Immaculate Conception Parish in Durham, North Carolina, had some modest organized parish social outreach. A strong core of people was committed to the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees. It was an important ministry, one that engaged a small number of people, led by a sympathetic pastor, himself with ties to Vietnam. Several families were resettled. These families have taken their places in the mainstream of parochial, civic and business life. There was no Social Concerns Committee as such. Today, six years later, the parish has a strong Social Concerns Committee, with nineteen sub-committees, each with its area of responsibility. These are: housing, advocacy, AIDS Ministry, Families First, Hispanic Ministry, People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, Prison Ministry, PharmAssist, Right to Life, Farm Labor Organizing Committee, Durham Congregation Assemblies Neighborhoods (CAN), Durham Congregations in Action (DCIA), Jobs With Justice, Sister Parish (Oaxaca, Mexico), Witness for Peace, Teens in Mission, Bread for the World, Habitat for Humanity and Crop Walk. A representative from each of these sub-committees forms the Social Concerns Committee and the chair of Social Concerns, elected by its members, sits on the parish Pastoral Council. The parish is proud of its outreach and each year new partners in ministry from the parish get on board. What accounts for this effort and this success in these two parishes?

### *Establishing the Model*

*L*eadership is essential. The pastor, his clerical associates, and the parish staff must be convinced that social outreach to the poor is not negotiable. Social outreach to the poor, however, that is identified with either the pastor or the staff will be short lived. It is the parish’s self-understanding that will give its social outreach to the poor continued life and growth. The pastor’s role is to be out in front. He is the parish’s public face in the community and that means he devotes a large percentage of his time to the civic, religious, and business communities. When the pastor is seen in the public forum, the parish is seen as concerned. As a leader the pastor is collegial, an enabler, and a visible presence in the public forum. The pastor who sticks close to the parish plant becomes a potted plant.

*The parish staff needs to be theologically grounded in its commitment to serve the poor.* The Pastoral Council needs the same conviction and commitment. This may take one or two years to achieve. There is no substitute for a pastor who will educate these leadership bodies himself, or see to it that competent theologians

are called upon. The social teaching of the Church, contained in the documents of Vatican II, the pastoral letters of the bishops of the United States and the encyclicals of the Holy Father, are resources for this catechizing. Through this catechesis a sense of “being Catholic with a mission” will be conveyed. In North Carolina where Catholics are a minority, parishioners readily respond to the leadership’s call to “build a Catholic culture in our part of the world.” Parishioners have a pride in the partnership of being and building Church.

*The parish as a whole, led by its lay and clerical leadership, needs to be informed,* at every step of the way, what the direction is that the parish is taking and why it is taking that direction. This means a Mission Statement is necessary that not only encapsulates the mission of the parish, but also over and over again serves as the axis around which the parish turns and to which it returns as it contemplates its mission. If the Mission Statement is constantly before the eyes of the congregation, read at every opportunity, published in every newsletter and bulletin, then the Mission Statement will become a living charter. Not everyone will agree, of course, with the parish’s new direction. But I am convinced that if you are able to get even the critics involved in very small projects, e.g., helping to mail brochures, signing a petition for more affordable housing or a bond issue that will benefit the poor, they will turn the corner.

*The poor have faces.* Recognizing these faces, working hand to hand with poor people, hearing their struggles and their dreams means being where they are and following up with them on a weekly, sometimes a monthly basis.

*Leveraging your resources is essential.* In both the Durham and Raleigh parishes, success in serving the poor is a result of collaborating with other faith communities. “Passage Home,” the affordable housing project begun at St. Francis Parish in 1987, began in cooperation with the Church of Gospel Holiness, a Pentecostal community in southeast Raleigh. A small duplex was purchased by St. Francis Parish and then refurbished by volunteers from the two communities. Members from each faith community formed “The Shepherds,” who would walk with each transitional family to insure its successful journey from welfare to work, or from prison to community living. These two faith communities, responsible for beginning “Passage Home,” are now six faith communities, all involved with affordable housing. They not only interact in providing affordable housing but they worship and have fellowship together. Thirteen years later, “Passage Home” has a \$1.3 million a year budget. Two hundred and fifty homeless families

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have been offered permanent housing in this time. Intensive case management, budgeting and credit counseling, family-parenting skills, programs for children and employment services have been offered to these families. “Passage Home” has become a model transitional housing program throughout North Carolina.

In Durham, both the Shelter for Hope as well as the Community Kitchen were established and run on a daily basis as a result of thirteen congregations getting together to form Durham Congregations in Action. These congregations raised the money, lobbied the city and county to help, and built the necessary facilities. Two hundred and fifty people are often fed three meals a day at the Community Kitchen, and fifty people are sheltered nightly. Once a week each faith community prepares and serves an evening meal. At the Shelter for Hope, in Durham as well as

in Raleigh, parishioners keep vigil with the homeless. In some instances, one parish community might well undertake a project by itself to enhance the quality of life of the poor. It should reconsider its action, aware that people together achieve more than one might at first glance realize.

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One of the most successful efforts to affect the life of the poor systemically is through the Industrial Area Foundation and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. The IAF has had enormous success in addressing issues that touch the lives of the poor. The Catholic Church in Chicago, Boston, New York, Baltimore and New Orleans, among others, has become partners with other

organizations to leverage their resources in order to convince political and business leaders to build affordable housing, reclaim neighborhoods, build community centers, support public schools, and address the crisis of the aging poor.

Immaculate Conception Parish is one of the founding communities of the IAF unit in Durham. It is called Durham CAN—Congregations, Assemblies and Neighborhoods. Thirty faith-based communities are in dialogue with elected officials and business leaders to create an agenda to affect systemic change for the poor. Two years ago, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, recognizing its ability to make a difference in the lives of the poor, granted Durham CAN \$60,000. A similar grant will be forthcoming this year. At Immaculate Conception, over one hundred and fifty parishioners are involved in Durham CAN.

### ***Conclusion***

**T**he model that is suggested here is not unique. As the bishops' statement makes clear, parishes across our country are “caring for the sick, opening

eyes and ears, helping life overcome death, and preaching the good news to the poor” (NCCB, 15). Pastors and pastoral leaders need to be convinced that getting started is easy. Catholic people are hungry to be part of building God’s kingdom. They recognize their baptismal call to serve. They want to be encouraged and shown the way. They will take it from there. The bishops conclude their statement with this admonition. “The final and most serious danger is for parish leaders to act as if the social ministry of the Church was the responsibility of someone else. Every believer is called to serve those in need, to work for justice, and to pursue peace. Every parish has the mission to help its members act on their faith in the world” (NCCB, 14).

### *References*

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