

Lay leader's guide

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JustFaith

An effective formation program to foster commitment to social ministry



Catholic social teaching has been called “our best kept secret,” “our buried treasure,” and “an essential part of Catholic faith.” Yet, in the words of the United States Catholic bishops:

Far too many Catholics are not familiar with the basic content of Catholic social teaching. More fundamentally, many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of Catholic faith. This poses a serious challenge for all Catholics, since it weakens our capacity to be a Church that is true to the demands of the gospel. We need to do more to share the social mission and message of our Church. (*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*)

Enter JustFaith Ministries (justfaith.org).

JustFaith Ministries offers opportunities for individuals to study the teachings on justice that we find in the Scriptures and church tradition.

JustFaith began in 1988 when Jack Jezreel was hired by a parish in Louisville, Kentucky, to be the parish social minister. Inspired by his involvement in the Catholic Worker movement, Jack set out to engage parishioners in the social mission of the church. A year into the job, he had made little headway and was faced with a choice: “Either I continue to meet with the same four people I’ve been meeting with for the rest of my life, or I do something different.” Jezreel chose the latter.

He had been a facilitator of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) for several years prior and had witnessed its

ability to change lives. He set out to create a formation program to expand people’s commitment to social ministry that would replicate many of the best features of the RCIA process:

- A lengthy process requiring a strong commitment by participants
- A substantive formation component using a variety of adult learning methods
- Opportunities to reflect on and discuss, thoughtfully and prayerfully
- A strong emphasis on small-group faith-sharing and community-building
- Retreat experiences and lots of opportunities for prayer

A tapestry of learning

JustFaith groups are made up of about 10-15 people who meet for 30 weekly ses-



sions. They go on two weekend retreats, and they have four Saturday immersion experiences. Overall, this adult formation process extends over eight months and uses the best of adult education practices, including books, videos, guest speakers, discussion, prayer, retreats, immersion experiences, and community building. The intent is to provide a tapestry of learning opportunities that emphasize and enliven the remarkable justice tradition of the Catholic faith. Participants are exposed to a substantive and demanding course of study. They also build community with other participants and share a journey of faith and compassion that is both life-giving and challenging.

“The first time through the program, I was fearful,” admits Jezreel. He worried that people would find it too long or irrelevant and drop out. But they didn’t. Within a few weeks, he could see that participants found the experience compelling and engaging. “People became ravenous for the program, for something that they did not even know was previously there.”

Soon the program spread from his parish in Louisville to various parts of the country. Eventually it picked up the sponsorship of Catholic Charities USA and became a non-profit corporation: JustFaith Ministries. Their line of programming now extends beyond the original JustFaith program to include similar offerings appropriate for ecumenical, college, and other parish settings. Today, there are approximately 22,000 graduates of the Just-

While JustFaith Ministries was born from the success of the JustFaith program, the organization now includes new layers of opportunity for faith formation.

- **Engaged Spirituality** presents a spiritual deepening process that invites small groups to explore the intersection between contemplative presence and social action.
- **JusticeWalking (J-Walking)** is a process that forms small communities of older teens and adults to engage in a spiritual journey and exploration of the radical call of the gospel.
- **College JusticeWalking (J-Walking)** is a semester-long “Discipleship Journey” that forms small communities of college students as they experiment with living the gospel message and the social implications of our faith.
- **JustMatters** is an expanding series of formation materials that allows participants to focus on a particular current social justice topic.
- **JustSkills** is primarily focused on the practical skills involved in organizing, strategizing, and effectively doing social ministry in the parish or church.

Faith program. By the summer of 2011, that figure is expected to reach 25,000.

Jezreel attributes the success of the program to our God-given nature. “God has made us in a way that—when our hearts are open and we are not shut down—we are inclined to care. We make an option for the poor.” JustFaith has been successful because it creates the opportunity for

this to happen.

So what happens to JustFaith graduates after the program? Most go through a period of discernment to see where God is calling them to use their gifts. Repeated surveys of JustFaith graduates have shown that approximately 90 percent of them become engaged in new social ministry activities or increase their engagement in areas where they were already committed. They are doing significant work to address human suffering and social need. They are helping to enhance the social mission of their churches, working within the community to alleviate suffering and poverty and to reach out to the global community.

They are doing exactly what Jezreel hoped they would. □



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A JUSTFAITH PARTNER

Starting in 2007, prompted by the success of the JustFaith program in Catholic parishes, **Bread for the World**, the largest Christian anti-hunger advocacy organization in the United States, became a partner with JustFaith Ministries. Bread for the World uses a version of JustFaith intended for the larger Christian community across the United States.

Bread for the World lobbies political leaders to end hunger at home and abroad. Bread for the World members write personal letters and emails and meet with our members of Congress.

They work through churches, campuses, and other organizations. For more information, go to: bread.org.