

MEETING AT THE MARGINS

In partnership with



Catholic Campaign for Human Development



With additional support from: Catholic Charities USA

Overview

Master, to whom shall we go?
John 6:68

You are about to embark upon a pilgrimage—a literal and figurative spiritual journey. Like all true pilgrimages, J-Walking is a journey in two directions:

moving out to engage the world that surrounds us, and
going within to listen to the indwelling Spirit who charges and changes hearts.
As J-Walkers, you will challenge and inspire one another
to deepen and broaden your circle of compassionate care.

As JW coordinators, you are responsible for discerning, contacting, and selecting a local organization that will host your J-Walking group every other gathering for the Meeting at the Margins sessions. Engaging with marginalized people reflects two vital dimensions of J-Walking.

First, J-Walking is about *people*.

J-Walkers build relationships with persons whose lives have been shaped by their marginalization. By forming friendships with these people, we meet Christ.

Second, J-Walking is about *widening our circle of awareness*.

J-Walkers examine the margins and boundaries they place around their lives. Looking carefully at our social connections allows us to draw into our lives people who have fallen to the edge.

Walking Humbly on Holy Ground

*...and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*
Micah 6:8

Call to mind an experience when you were outside your comfort zone or in unfamiliar territory... What happened? How did you feel? What did you do? Who did you meet? What did you learn?

Even the most self-assured among us tend to avoid times when we are out of our element in uncomfortable or unfamiliar situations, with people who are unknown or somehow “different.” The feeling of being out of place, or unsure what to do or how to act, can be very humbling. This is the sense of vulnerability we experience when we choose to cross boundaries of class, culture, race, or even familiarity. It is a signal that we are crossing into other people’s lives.

Like Moses before the burning bush, we realize we are standing on holy ground. It is necessary at such times and in such places to symbolically *take off our shoes*. This kind of unsettling awkwardness indicates that we are crossing a threshold, moving away from our normal frame of reference and out to our margins, the edges where new relationships, fresh perspectives, and transformation await us. It is precisely at such times and on such shaky ground that we can become available and open to the transforming presence of God’s Spirit, working on us, reaching into our hearts to rearrange our lives.

“Outreach” and “Inreach” Experiences

Jesus led his followers *out* of their familiar environments and *into* relationships with people from all walks of life, especially social outcasts. Together, they visited, ate with, and befriended people marginalized by society. While they *reached out* to people in the towns and villages of Palestine, they were conversely touched by those people they allowed to *reach into* their lives. It was by visiting, socializing, sharing food and stories, teaching, and healing that the disciples were exposed to God’s Reign breaking their lives open. Building relationships that foster this solidarity (or belonging) and that challenge the existence of socially-constructed boundaries is the hope and intention of Meeting at the Margins.

The tasks of selecting and contacting this site need to be accomplished by the JW coordinators BEFORE scheduling the J-Walking calendar.

Widening the Margins of Possibility

Every other J-Walking session takes place at a social service agency located outside the familiar area of the J-Walking group. Finding an agency willing to develop an ongoing relationship with your group is vital to J-Walking. Regular visits with this community will provide the human faces, stories, and relationships that frame the J-Walking experience.

Unfortunately, because there are so many situations in which our neighbors have been pushed to the edges, there are many locations for such visits. In addition to more obvious agencies, consider other less known organizations. Widening your search and keeping your heart open to the creative impulses of the Spirit can generate new avenues for life-giving connections. You may find yourself compelled to build a bridge to connect J-Walkers with a group of people who are largely overlooked in your community.

As you widen the scope of your search, consider some of these places and people:

- Migrant worker or refugee ministries
- After-school tutorial programs for low-income families
- Daycare centers for elderly, disabled, or homebound people
- Residential programs for people who are mentally challenged or disabled
- L’Arche or Catholic Worker communities
- The Urban League
- Women’s shelters
- Veterans’ Administration hospitals
- County- or State-supported nursing homes or adult daycare centers
- Juvenile detention centers or rehabilitation programs
- Community centers (such as YMCA)
- Youth or children’s programs for low-income communities
- Group homes for people in recovery or living with HIV
- Justice ministries run by marginalized persons
- Outreach ministries supported by churches or religious communities

Building friendships with the staff and individuals at the agency is so important to the integrity of the J-Walking process that every other two-hour session takes place on site, at the service agency. The first hour is dedicated to visiting people, in the hope of developing relationships like the ones Jesus formed. The remaining hour of this session takes place in a room at or near the agency; it follows the reflection-dialogue pattern of the other J-Walking sessions. Building these ongoing relationships “grounds” us in gospel justice, so that it remains a tangible, challenging, human, and personal part of J-Walkers’ lives.

The goal of J-Walking is *solidarity*, building relationships that widen our experience of belonging. Solidarity requires time dedicated to listening, visiting, sharing and *directly connecting* with people’s lives. Agency staff that is accustomed to assigning “volunteer” tasks might be apprehensive about exposing the people they serve to visiting groups. It is important to make personal connections with agencies to introduce the J-Walking vision and clarify some ways that your group can meet the needs of the organization.

(See Attachment A for a sample letter of introduction.)

Practical Considerations

- Identify places that are central and reachable for the group.
- Be attentive to the travel time involved and the potential for using public transport.
- The first hour (the relational experience) involves participating in tasks that meet the needs of the agency, *while also allowing J-Walkers the opportunity to build relationships with people at the agency*. These tasks should be set up in advance.
- Look for agencies with available space in which J-Walkers can gather for dialogue and reflection after the first hour of interaction.
- If the agency has no available space, request the use of a room in a parish or school in the surrounding neighborhood.
- If your area offers an array of outreach ministries, seek out the situations of greatest need—the overlooked ministries.
- Consider the size of your group relative to the space and capacity of the agency (twelve people can easily overwhelm a small outreach center).
- Arrange to meet with a staff person at the agency.
- Be patient and flexible. *Building meaningful relationships takes time.*

The ideal location for Meeting at the Margins is an agency that allows J-Walkers to spend an hour of quality time in the company of the people there. Initially, there might be tasks to fulfill such as serving meals, cleaning, or tutoring. Such activities can foster relationships when they are done in conjunction with others; however, they should not become the focus of your presence. While important, these tasks are only the “excuse” which allows relationships and solidarity to grow.

J-Walking groups located in wealthier areas may feel led to make a regular visit to underserved areas. Those based in remote or rural areas, where social services are widely dispersed, may need to travel to a nearby town where they can connect with agencies that serve the needs of people across the county.

Discerning God's Call

*“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?
And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?*

And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”...

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Matthew 25: 37-40

Develop a list of potential organizations. Begin to name the kinds of people with whom your group might be called to form relationships. Indicate or add to the list the names of groups of people that seem farthest from your community's circle of relationships, keeping in mind the divisive social realities of racism, sexism, and classism. Be attentive to the value of crossing boundaries and the challenge of moving into unfamiliar areas to encounter people who are on the margins of your social circle. You may need to contact your local Catholic Charities office or diocesan office of Justice and Peace for guidance.

This process should involve prayerful discernment, inviting direction and guidance from the Holy Spirit. Use the following steps to guide you and your fellow JW coordinator through the discernment process (*you will need your list, a candle, and a Bible*):

1. Enter a quiet, prayerful space together. Place your compiled list of potential Meeting at the Margins sites at the center, with the candle and Bible.
2. Light the candle. Read aloud Matthew 25:31-46.
3. Prayerfully read through your list; name each agency and the people served there. As each agency or group is named, quietly pray the refrain: *“Lord, to whom shall we go?”*
4. Spend a few moments together in silence.
5. Each coordinator names the place/s and group/s to which s/he feels particularly drawn.
6. Keep in mind the recommendations in this document. Discuss the practical considerations (safety, time, and travel). Identify the places and people that are most accessible to your group.
7. Select at least *two* different potential sites that you feel called to investigate.
8. Divide the tasks of making personal contact with the agencies or groups you have chosen. Commit to a three-step process for making the connection:
 - Call to schedule a visit.
 - Send a follow-up letter.
 - Make a site visit.
9. Select a date to share feedback with one another on your experience at the sites. (At this second meeting, select one agency with whom your group will commit.)
10. Close this meeting (and the follow-up meeting) by reading Isaiah 58:6-8. Bless the ministries and the people involved with the organizations you have visited.

Connecting with a Social Service Agency

Review the talking points outlined in Attachment B before contacting a social service agency. When you call to make the initial contact, listen for opportunities that might allow J-Walkers to make connections with people. Be aware that your presence at the agency might not be welcomed or needed. You may discover that the one-hour limit is too brief for the tasks that are suggested. Keep in mind that from the agency's perspective, the tasks or activities your group can accomplish might take precedence. Flexibility and creativity in talking through interactive possibilities will be invaluable.

Some organizations require medical screening precautions (such as TB testing) before you can interact with people at the site. Others may require a signed release or permission form to protect the organization. It is important to be cooperative and willing to connect with the agency's mission.

Request an orientation by a member of the agency's staff during the first Meeting at the Margins, your second session as a J-Walking group. This will provide insights, background, and a deeper sense of the social realities faced by the people you will meet.

Creative Approaches

The six Meeting at the Margins sessions provide an opportunity to frame J-Walking as a pilgrimage that leads J-Walkers *out of* their familiar world and *into* the lives of others. It may be challenging at first to find activities that will serve the agency while also allowing for personal interactions. This can be especially difficult when you are limited to tasks like folding newsletters, weeding flowerbeds, or picking up trash. These are not unimportant jobs and J-Walkers are encouraged to perform them humbly. However, challenge J-Walkers to invent creative ways to transform their tasks into opportunities for interactive engagement.

If your group is given a task that does not allow you to interact with the people at the agency, ask for the opportunity to visit (or be introduced) either before or after the task has been done. As trust is built, J-Walkers may notice other needs and possibilities that *do* allow for personal interaction; suggest these to the staff. In time, it may be possible to invite new friends at the agency to share the tasks with you.

Some agencies have fixed roles for volunteers, such as serving meals or handing out sandwiches. Challenge J-Walkers to gradually move their presence beyond this job description. Simple adjustments such as making and giving out name tags, introducing one another, bringing snacks to share, and/or asking permission to eat or visit with people have the potential to transform and even reverse these roles.

Relationships can be built around monthly BINGO sessions, card games, watching videos, sharing snacks, or homework assistance. Gradually, as relationships deepen, activities become less important and other opportunities for "unlikely" relationships develop.

Naming and Knowing People

In the J-Walking process, Meeting at the Margins takes place in the context of spirituality and solidarity. Before and after each visit, J-Walkers gather in a circle outside the agency for a moment of quiet prayer as a co-facilitator leads the group in a short blessing. This reminds participants that they are standing on holy ground.

These visits are not intended as “field studies” in poverty; J-Walkers are strongly dissuaded from dwelling on the benefits of “making a difference” in the lives of others. Over the course of the process, your group will be challenged to find creative ways to move from task-focused encounters to working and walking *with* others. In this way, energy is directed toward building relationships. *The focus shifts away from what your group is “doing” at the agency to how these relationships are impacting J-Walkers lives.*

JW coordinators should be aware of their own assumptions about poverty, marginalized people, service, and charity. Volunteering and “making a difference” in other people’s lives is a worthy concept. There is, however, a hidden temptation to distance ourselves from the real people we encounter and our complicity in their marginalization. If “they” are seen as the recipients of our service and care, with little to offer “us,” that sense of deepening relationship as a *mutual* process of *belonging together* is lost. Additionally, we risk overlooking the necessary healing, liberation, and life-adjustment gifted to us when we enter such a relationship.

J-Walkers are not volunteers; rather, they are pilgrims seeking the Reign of God and relationships that offer liberating perspectives on the world. The regular visits are not about the *place*, nor should they be about the *activity*. Meeting at the Margins should be about the names, faces, and relationships that J-Walkers carry with them throughout the JusticeWalking process.

JW coordinators introduce the agency to J-Walkers at the opening retreat during a reflection that names the place and the people the group will connect with over the six visits. J-Walkers will spend some time reflecting on what it means to be “at the margins,” and how encounters with people on the edge might stretch them.

These sessions at the margins are not intended to evoke feelings of sympathy or accomplishment. J-Walkers should not look for merits (or accumulate service hours) for the time they spend at the margins. Nor do they enter people’s lives in order to feel good about themselves and feel bad for others. It is only when we risk becoming implicated in people’s lives, in the vulnerability of human encounter, that the synthetic (yet powerful!) separations of race, class, economic condition, status, age, intelligence, or ability can begin to be challenged and transformed.

To “encounter” people means to *make people count*. J-Walkers journal, reflect, and pray about the realities of marginalized people in their local area. As the sessions unfold, they write the names of the people they are coming to know on the prayer cloth. They are encouraged to name and pray for the people they are encountering at the margins, and wrestle with the question, “How do the ways in which we live our lives impact the people we meet at the margins?”

Timeframe and Scheduling

Meeting at the Margins sessions should be arranged according to the needs of the agency, at a time and for a purpose that assists the people there. Arranging meaningful and engaging encounters can be difficult, and in a convenience-driven society, we must be wary of the temptation to settle for the easiest options. Ideally, your visits should follow a fixed pattern, scheduled at a regular time and day of the week (for example, the second Saturday of the month from 12:00PM – 2:00PM). Regularity helps J-Walkers remember and plan for this commitment as part of the rhythm of their lives. It also enables the people at the agency to prepare for visits; both J-Walkers and their new friends will soon excitedly anticipate visits with one another.

It is very likely that the Meeting at the Margins sessions will need to be scheduled on weekends. This may conflict with other family, social, or school-related commitments. There is no easy resolution to scheduling conflicts. However, these conflicts can be fertile opportunities for young and older J-Walkers to evaluate their priorities and commitments. Working through scheduling conflicts and entering into dialogue about responsibilities demonstrates how to compromise for the sake of the group. J-Walkers sign a covenant of faithfulness at the opening retreat and are expected to participate fully in all six visits. *JW coordinators should model the level of consistency and commitment that is expected of the younger J-Walkers.*

Safety and Liability

Coordinating the Meeting at the Margins sessions will require planning and foresight. While it is necessary to challenge J-Walkers to move beyond their comfort zones, it is also important to use care and good judgment when discerning how and where your group might be able to go safely. When making the initial visit to an agency, ask about the safety of the area, accessibility, public transport options, and parking, as well as permission slips and health precautions. JW coordinators are responsible for creating a permission form that identifies the agency and indicates the dates of the visits (use Attachment C as a template).

Unless you are using public transport, J-Walkers should meet at the site, rather than try to coordinate rides from the parish or school. At least one JW coordinator should arrive at the agency first to greet early arrivals.

All J-Walkers under eighteen years old are required to complete a permission form.
One of the adults should bring the signed permission slips to each visit.

*“Coming face-to-face with those who live in poverty
allowed me to put down my idea that they live in a separate society from me.
I now fully understand that they are a child of God.
Thus, it is my responsibility to care for them.”*

M.K Verdun

Summary

JusticeWalking is a mobile experience that asks us
to *walk into* unfamiliar places and other people's lives
in pursuit of God's re-adjusting love and justice
so that others may *reach in* and transform us.

Building relationships with marginalized people puts everyone in a vulnerable place. When we are vulnerable, our secure world is exposed and we become reachable and teachable. *Vulnerability is essential to the transforming power of God's compassionate justice in our lives.*

Placing J-Walkers *physically with* marginalized people
and frequenting unlikely places to experience the sinfulness of social boundaries
are prerequisite actions to *understanding* and *welcoming* the re-socialization
that brings us into *reverent relationship* with our God
and *right relationship* with our neighbor.

Visit, listen, encounter, and befriend are the defining verbs for Meeting at the Margins.

As relationships develop, we begin to recognize that *we are all in need* of personal and social restoration, whether or not we live on the margins. Building trust and deepening relationships is the natural way to widen the hearts of J-Walkers and the people involved at the agencies.

When planning and making space for encounters at the social service agency becomes challenging and time-consuming, avoid the temptation to seek convenient alternatives that reduce or even eliminate these visits. ***This regular pilgrimage outside your comfort zone is an irreplaceable component of J-Walking that should not be compromised.***

May your group be led by the Holy Spirit
into **places and lives**
that **open your eyes**
to new ways of seeing God's world;
that **open your hearts**
to new ways of loving God's people;
and that **energize** your J-Walking community
with challenging and **life-affirming relationships.**

Attachment A

Sample Letter of Introduction

Adapt this template to send to the agency staff you have contacted.

(DATE)

Dear _____,

Thank you for your willingness to meet with me to discuss the possibility of my group of (*number*) adults and (*number*) young people making a connection with your agency and the people with whom you work.

JusticeWalking is a process for younger and older adults who, aware of the injustice in our world, are trying to understand what it means to live a just life, faithful to God's call and the social teachings of our (Catholic) faith. Developing intentional relationships with marginalized persons and deepening our awareness of the suffering and brokenness in our world are important goals for our journey.

As I mentioned in our telephone conversation on (*day and date*), we are interested in sharing in your mission as you work with (*name the people served at the site*). I am hopeful we can find ways to assist you in your work that would also allow us to make a connection with the people at (*name the agency*).

I look forward to visiting you on (*day and date of scheduled site visit*), so that we can discuss the possibility of meeting at your agency for six regular visits over the course of our process, starting some time in (*name the first month of J-Walking*). I also mentioned our hope of finding a place for our group to gather after each visit. Any assistance you can offer in helping us locate a nearby room for an hour of sharing and reflection after our visit will be deeply appreciated.

If you have any questions please contact me at (*phone and/or email*) and I will see you (*date, place, and time of scheduled visit*).

May God bless you and your work,
(*Signature*)

(*Typed name*)
J-Walking Coordinator

Attachment B Discussion Points

Use these points to guide your discussions with staff at the agency.

- Introduce yourself, describe your group, and outline the J-Walking process.
- Ask the staff person to describe the agency's mission and the people with whom they work.
- Make it clear that you are looking to make a long-term commitment—six regularly scheduled visits over the course of the process, spending about an hour with the people they work with.
- Stress the importance of participating in the work and mission of the agency and the value of building relationships with the people there.
- Mention some ideal opportunities for personal connections and interactions that include visiting and working with the people there.
- Many organizations do not have a religious focus, and deal with people of diverse religious affiliations. Be clear that your goals involve helping, visiting, and building relationships, adding that you have no intention to preach or evangelize.
- Ask about the possible use of a room at the agency where your group can gather for the second hour of dialogue and reflection. If there are no rooms available at any of the sites you have selected, widen your search to include a nearby parish or school and request permission to utilize a neighboring facility.
- Discuss issues of safety, making clear that you are concerned about the privacy and safety of the people they work with, as well as the safety of your own group.
- Schedule a date and time for a face-to-face visit with the staff person responsible for organizing and orienting volunteers.

Attachment 3
Sample Permission Form

Adapt this template to comply with policies in your diocese. Specify the dates of the four visits in the space provided. If these dates change, make a corrected version for parents to sign. Regulations in some States require these forms to be notarized.

JusticeWalking

A journey of being rooted
and grounded in love.

Sponsored by

(Add the name of your local sponsoring agency- parish, school or diocese)

MEETING AT THE MARGINS
Permission Form

I, _____, parent/guardian give permission for my child
_____ to participate in the **JusticeWalking - Meeting at
the Margins**, at the following location: (name of agency, street/ zip)_____

on the following dates: _____ .

I further give my permission for my child to ride in any vehicle designated by the adult in whose care my child has been entrusted while participating in the above activity. In consideration of permitting my child to participate, I do hereby, for myself and my child, waive and release any and all claims that I might have against (name of sponsoring agency) and any designated driver of a vehicle, for any and all injuries or losses suffered by said child while engaged in the above activities, including travel to and from the site.

Signature of parent/guardian _____ Date _____

Medical Release

In the event of any medical emergency every effort will be made to contact the parents or guardians of the children involved. In the event that I cannot be reached, I hereby give permission to the attending physician/s to secure proper treatment for my child, as named herein.

Signature of parent/guardian _____ Date _____

Phone/Day () _____ Phone/Evening () _____

Health Care Provider _____ Policy # _____