

Some Tips on Social Justice Work

by Kate Lore

At its worse, Social Justice work can divide a church. It can spark political battles, alienate members and set a climate in which everyone is self-righteously pointing fingers at one another. At its best, Social Justice work can strengthen and enlarge a congregation. It can build community, nourish the spiritual life of members, and shape public life. I wrote this article to provide some hints on how to avoid the pitfalls inherent in this type of work and to help you be successful in your journey as a Justice Seeker.

Things you want to DO!

- Be the change you want to see. Bring your Highest Self into this work. Demonstrate compassion, respect and patience with everyone - even those with whom you differ significantly.
- Ground your work in our shared values. Try opening and/or closing your meetings with a reading or song.
- Find your focus. If you are going to effect change, you need to focus your energies. Avoid the temptation to try to address every issue that moves you.
- Try different tactics: When trying to engage members of our church into your efforts, try maximizing your efforts by offering a variety of opportunities for involvement to account for different personality types. Consider alternately offering hands-on activities (e.g., making lunches for homeless teens or building a Habitat House), educational events (e.g., lectures or teach-ins), and legislative advocacy efforts (letter-writing campaigns or working on a ballot measure).
- Learn leadership skills. Social Justice leaders need to be "big picture" types who can facilitate meetings and help respectfully moderate conflict. Not everyone
- who is interested in providing leadership has these skills, however~ so our church regularly offers Leadership Training (see the Program Guide). Check them~o~t!
- Be inclusive. Our members vary in many ways. Some members are long-term "pillars", while others are brand-new. Some are wealthy; others struggle to make ends meet. We are youth, young adults, folks with children, seniors, single, married, divorced, GBLT and straight. Our ethnicities vary, as do our cultures, our politics and our understandings of the Sacred. We need to intentionally involve everyone and welcome new faces.
- Get organized. Fellowship and spontaneity are fine and good but they can derail social justice work if they are not a structured part of an organized agenda. Consider the following:
 - 1 Start and end meetings on time.
 - 2 Assign a facilitator and a timekeeper for each meeting.
 - 3 Stick to your agenda. If an item arises that must be discussed, check in with the group to determine which agenda item/s will be omitted until next time.

Things you DON'T want to do!

- Don't be judgmental. In an attempt to "enlighten" people in to living or speaking the "right" way, many well-intentioned people put all of their energy into laying blame, assigning guilt, or catching people in politically incorrect acts. The result of this style of "enlightenment" is ALIENATION. This is not an effective way to mobilize people. Please don't do it..
- Don't allow Burn Out to infect you. If it's not feeding your soul, don't do it. Social justice work should add to your enjoyment of life, stimulating both heart and mind. If you feel depleted, you are either taking on too much work or the wrong kind of work.
- Don't give up. It is not easy to alter long-established patterns. Change takes time, especially if that change is to be long lasting. We will not fix all of the world's problems in our lifetimes. Rather, we must just "keep on keeping on" in the most loving, compassionate, equitable and effective way possible.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. If you find yourself struggling to move ahead with Social Justice work, please contact me. That's what I'm here for.