# Charity and Justice Commission: A History St. Joseph's Catholic Community

#### 1999

Late in the year, Fr. Tom Radaich asked Phil and Jackie Solem to form plans for a new parish group that would address social concerns in the parish and community.

#### 2000

This ministry was approved and accepted as an official committee of the parish by the Pastoral Council on February 3, 2000. The task description is:

- 1. To serve as a consistent advocate or voice for the works of mercy and social justice.
- 2. To coordinate these works by providing:
  - Information exchange: what is being done and what needs to be done
  - A contact point for the presentation of personal and social needs
  - A systematic way for service and the works of mercy to happen
  - A way to coordinate with other churches and community initiatives
- 3. To initiate responses to needed service and continuing evangelization and education of our own parishioners regarding the gospel call to active mercy and justice.
- 4. To devise ongoing strategies for nurturing volunteers, attracting new energy and new faces, rotating and distributing the responsibilities.

The first meeting was held on February 22 and the first project was what came to be known as the "Lenten Blitz". Using Matthew 25:31-40, each weekend Mass during Lent involved education and volunteer opportunities concerning those who are *hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison.* 

A parish survey of needs conducted in March received 600 responses. They were used to define a range of projects and undertakings. Three members joined the steering committee of Action through Churches Together, to form a new organization in Itasca County. With the approval of the pastor and pastoral council, work began to promote the idea of using the old church as a ministry center for resources and projects, including a Kids' Café. Connections were made with the Diocesan social justice ministry.

The first annual retreat in September resulted in the formation of our mission statement: Believing that charity and justice are an outpouring of sacramental life, and essential signs of the Gospel of Jesus at work, we set forth to educate, inspire, and serve. Areas of focus were determined to be: response to immediate needs, education, environment, global awareness, and children's issues.

# 2001

The Lenten education series was based on the Catholic Social Teachings of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Working with the pastor and music director, the teaching, music and liturgy tied in with the Gospel each week and was introduced before Mass by a member of Charity and Justice.

In response to the parish survey, plans were made for a greeter program and parish life committee. Education about "Every Church a Peace Church" was begun. In the fall, a ten session program "From Violence to Wholeness" was presented. It was well received and repeated the following year. Members maintained involvement with ACT, Children First, Crop Walk and Meals on Wheels. In partnership with members of Carmel Lutheran Church, a benefit dinner was organized for a couple in need (one from each church) and \$11,000 was raised.

# 2002

The Lenten series used the USCCB document, "*Everyday Christianity*" – families; workers; owners, managers, investors; consumers; good stewards; and citizens.

Work began to create a parish library. Information and education about Fair Trade coffee was introduced and became an ongoing project. Prior to the bishops' conference in Dallas, a letter was written to Bishop Schnurr regarding sexual abuse by clergy.

War and violence were vital issues; prayer cards, peace presentations and group discussions were used to build awareness and educate the parish about the Church's policy on peace. This continued to be a topic for the following Lenten series in 2003.

#### 2003

We were asked by Fr. Tom to send a representative to pastoral council meetings. His direction was to "challenge the pastoral council to enable the whole parish to charity and justice". He asked that C&J members write two of the petitions for the Prayers of the Faithful each week.

Educational presentations grew in number and variety; one was "Through the Eye of the Needle", a simple living forum. Dr. William Hill was invited to present Bible Study sessions which began in January, 2004.

With Action through Churches Together, members of C&J were active in community issues such as housing and the Children's Sabbath liturgies. Parishioners were informed about Circles of Support and encouraged to mentor families who were dealing with poverty. A subcommittee was formed to focus on special needs.

#### 2004

Maryknoll "Works of Mercy" posters were purchased and laminated, to be used with many displays. That began during Lent, when the topics were: *Reaching Out – in Understanding, Charity, Justice, Peace and Fairness*. The Heifer Project was promoted. Members began annual participation in the Lenten Stations of the Cross and soup suppers.

Circles of Support was invited to have their weekly group meetings at St. Joseph's. Many of the mentors were parishioners. Working with the Child Protection Task Force, we provided ongoing support for the annual fund raising dinner for the Itasca Alliance against Sexual Assault. A popular series of talks were on "Comparative Religions".

A major project was the ongoing exploration of the use of the old church as a resource for the community – a social action center. Coordination of C&J activities continued with Envision on this and other efforts. A report of the commission's activities for the year was made available to parishioners as an insert for a December bulletin.

## 2005

The Lenten Educational Series was done in cooperation with the Faith Formation unit of Envision. Talks were presented between Masses on Sundays. The theme was "Rich in Compassion". Topics were: *Seeds of Social Justice* by Fr. Bill Graham; *Shelter from the Storm* (on homelessness) by Becky Boelter of Kootasca; *What Poverty Looks Like* by director of Circles of Support; and *A Personal Story* (on capital punishment) by Don Streufert (whose daughter was murdered in Grand Rapids).

With ACT and Envision, 200 parishioners were interviewed to determine concerns, needs, and issues in the parish and community. A second goal was the establishment of a data base of volunteers in the parish. The decision that Fair Trade Coffee would be used at St. Joseph's was made by the pastoral council and the pastor.

After five years of effort, it was disappointing to learn that the licensing and remodeling of the old church were obstacles too large to overcome. When we could no longer hope to set up a Kids' Café, we initiated the effort to have a "Kids' Packs to Go" program at the Second Harvest Food Bank. Beginning with a few volunteers and two schools, the number of children served each month has gone from 56 to nearly 2000 (in 2014).

Members helped with the resettlement in Grand Rapids of a refugee family from Sri Lanka, and continued participation in Crop Walk, Walk for Justice and the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition "Day on the Hill" at the capitol in St. Paul. The work on the parish library was completed and many parishioners were involved with plans for a homeless shelter.

With the encouragement of Fr. Jerry Weiss, the use of a simple peace prayer was promoted in the parish and school: "Jesus, Prince of Peace, May our hearts be open to your peace; may we share that peace with all." Calendars of artwork done by parish children and based on the question, "what makes you feel peaceful?" were created and sold, with profits used for the new library. Some calendars were placed in classrooms.

## 2006

*GRACE House homeless shelter* received start-up funding and began hiring staff and training volunteers early in the year. Action through Churches Together had conducted many interviews with pastors and many community meetings to identify this project as the most vital need. Beginning on May 21<sup>st</sup>, guests were housed at Zion Lutheran Church.

Key advocates for children were designated in each of the fourteen ACT churches. They kept our congregations informed on legislative matters that affected children in Minnesota. In partnership with the Envision program, we sponsored a study group using the Compendium of Social Doctrine.

The *Lenten focus was on peace – within ourselves, in our families, community, workplace, and with the ecology of the earth.* Post cards were made available to parishioners – both pro and con – concerning the proposed marriage amendment to the state constitution. Bishop Schnurr sent a letter of disapproval. Charity and Justice members recognized the difficulty in dealing with such controversial issues as the amendment and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In October, St. Joseph's hosted a large gathering of people concerned with the welfare of children. ACT brought Marian Wright Edelman, Director of the Children's Defense Fund, to speak to more than 700 area residents. Based in Washington DC, it was the first time she had presented a speech dealing with children in poverty in a rural area, and she was amazed at the community response.

#### 2007

Support for GRACE House homeless shelter and recruitment of volunteers remained a priority. Funds were collected that would allow residents to use a Laundromat for personal laundry. St. Joseph's opened the youth room for residents on Saturdays and Sundays. (Shelter at Zion Lutheran was available only on evenings and overnights.)

Charity and Justice members researched "micro loan" programs. The Lenten educational series was done in partnership with Envision Faith Formation once again. Lori Dowling led the discussions on Sister Joan Chittister's book, Scarred by Struggle: Transformed by Hope.

"Peace Weekend" was held in early September. Phil Steger presented "Leaving Iraq Now" and Sara Thomsen performed a concert based on the theme. Invitations were sent to social ministry committees of area churches, and the response was good. Social gatherings were held after each event. Weekend homilies and music emphasized the peace theme.

Economics and justice was the theme for October. Fair Trade items were promoted and Fr. Jerry presented a study on the Book of Amos, "prophet of peace and justice". Homelessness and hunger were addressed in November, when there was a guest homilist from "Food for the Poor". Efforts to recruit volunteers for Community Café, GRACE House and food shelf were increased. The community effort to raise awareness of homelessness in Itasca County -- "One Night without a Home" – received nearly \$5000 in pledges. St. Joseph's parishioners contributed one fifth of that.

A letter to the editor of the Herald Review recognized and thanked the congregation and pastors of Zion Lutheran Church for their hospitality and support of GRACE House.

#### 2008

The first of monthly Sundays featuring charity and justice issues focused on the Beatitudes and Circles of Support, with a presentation by the director between Masses and acknowledgment of

the parishioners who volunteer, along with gratitude for the church's continuing hospitality. Two groups were formed, with weekly meetings both at St. Joseph's and at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church. "Allies help build bridges out of poverty."

Members continued to promote CROP Walk, Kid Packs to Go, ACT, and GRACE House. Day services at the homeless shelter were made available to guests at Zion Lutheran Church from Monday through Friday. Day services continued on weekends at St. Joseph's. Jean Hoshal took over responsibility for the parish library. Promotion of the Peace Prayer continued.

Charity and Justice Sunday presentations in April concerned information on Child Abuse Prevention month and a focus on the environment, using teachings of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. In May, the subject was micro credit banks available to the poor in third world countries. *Discussion began about the possibility of a local "service fair" modeled after Project Homeless Connect in Minneapolis and other cities.* 

Ministry for families of the incarcerated was begun with the offer to provide support coming from a parishioner with that experience. Information would be in the bulletin on a recurring basis. Previous efforts to establish a local prison ministry were unsuccessful, but individual contacts continued to be made.

In the weeks prior to the national election, "Faithful Citizenship" material based on the seven major themes of Catholic Social teaching, was obtained from the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and provided to parishioners.

# 2009

Work continued on ministry to prisoners and their families, with prayers of the faithful, bulletin notices and books available in the library (provided from the C&J budget). Training was available for the Prison Visitor Service Program.

Charity and Justice members contacted GRACE House and Kootasca Crisis Housing regarding a local version of Homeless Connect that would include others living in poverty as well. The goal was to bring all services together in one place while promoting community awareness of the need and also of the many agencies available.

Information was gathered from a survey by ICC on people in poverty in Itasca County, and from Circles of Support. It was found that similar projects were being done in other rural areas of the state, including Aitkin County, called *Community Connect*. A panel of representatives from area housing organizations attended the April meeting of the Charity and Justice Commission. Following the viewing of a new video on homelessness in Itasca County, the discussion quickly determined that there was sufficient interest by the agencies to provide a one day event that would connect people to the services they need. Many volunteers would be needed, and the first contact was made to Action through Churches Together.

Father Jerry sent a letter to pastors of ACT churches inviting them to send representatives to a meeting at St. Joseph's early in May. Twenty five people from five churches attended. C&J members met with the volunteer coordinator of "Homeless Connect" in Minneapolis for advice.

Val Stevens, Salvation Army Director, had participated in similar events in rural counties of Minnesota and provided resources. By the end of June, meetings were being held regularly by the large group and by working committees. C&J members took responsibility for publicity and for recruiting and training volunteers. Handmade quilts were collected at St. Joseph's.

With the sponsorship of Action through Churches Together, the Salvation Army and Grace House, and funding by the Blandin Foundation, about four hundred people enjoyed the October day at the Civic Center. Sixty agencies and service providers set up booths to dispense information on resources available in the county. The statewide count by the Wilder Foundation of those who are homeless was incorporated into the registration procedure.

# 2010

Planning meetings for Community Connect began in January with representatives of the Salvation Army, GRACE House, Action through Churches Together, and Charity and Justice. Our members were again responsible for recruiting volunteers – contacts were made with civic groups, the community college and area churches.

The Lenten focus was on "Water for Peace". It was a grass root, interfaith effort by people in Minnesota to provide potable drinking water for people in Iraq, particularly children. Displays and information solicited donations throughout Lent. With help from other parish groups, a breakfast fundraiser was held in April. The response by parishioners was very generous: \$7625 donated by St. Joseph's provided clean drinking water for 2400 students in six large schools. A scrapbook was created of pictures and letters received from Iraq.

A long time hope became reality when it was learned that a parishioner would be part of a medical team mission to Honduras and would appreciate support. Members continued to promote the Heifer Project and micro credit loans, GRACE House and Kid Packs to Go. A sock drive was held for the Salvation Army "back to school" backpacks given to children in need. 544 pairs of socks were collected.

In September, the pastor and the Facility Advisory Committee approved the idea to display the "Works of Mercy" posters on the long north wall. They would take the place of the time line plaques after the school was completed.

With the demise of ACT, it became difficult to find effective ways to join with other churches in dealing with actions directed at the root causes of social injustice. Charity and social service provide responses to immediate need. Justice and social change respond to long term need and resolving structural injustice.

Community Connect was very successful once again, with increased numbers of guests and agencies taking part. ICC students made up half of the 135 volunteers and were essential to the project. Charity and Justice members promoted community events during National Homelessness and Hunger week in November.

## 2011

Water for Peace was again featured during Lent – awareness of the need for donations to the Iraqi and American Reconciliation Project. Members and friends had another Egg Bake and Bagel fundraiser that brought the total funds gathered to \$5000. Other area churches joined in similar efforts for that cause.

The focus on global missions was very successful. Two local women spoke at Masses, a parishioner going to Honduras and the other to Haiti. \$4300 and two carloads of supplies were donated for the trips. A young woman offered to go along on the mission to Haiti, and additional funding was obtained. She presented a program at a CCW meeting after her return.

A proposal to research the possibility of a Free Clinic in Grand Rapids was brought up. It would be based on the experience of the Free Clinic in Hibbing for the past three years. Our parish nurse was contacted and she received overwhelming support from the hospital CEO and many others in the community. Recruitment of volunteers began with a well-attended meeting at St. Joseph's. Plans were well under way by April. Fr. Jerry offered to share space in the old rectory for the clinic, which would be staffed by volunteers and open two evenings a month. The *Project Care Free Clinic* opened in July. As time went on, more hours were added as needed. St. Joseph's and other churches and groups donated supplies and funds. Charity and Justice hosted an Open House at the clinic in September.

Members were concerned about plans to move the library to the school media center. Open only during school hours, it would not be available for people at Adoration, funerals, waiting for Mass, etc. After meeting with Fr. Jerry, a formal request was made by letter recommending that it remain in place. Children's books were added to the library by individuals and C&J funds.

Community Connect was once again a success, but a lack of people on the planning committee was a problem. The commitment over many months is a deterrent and agency support dwindled. ICC engineering students designed the floor plan and directed set up and tear down.

## 2012

It was decided to continue the egg bake and bagel brunch fundraiser, with the donations given to the Grand Rapids Food Shelf and GRACE House. The second collections during Lent provided a consistent theme, with the same beneficiaries. The costs for the brunch were again donated or covered by the C&J budget, and raised \$1000. The food shelf received nearly \$6000; it was during March, so received matching funds. The donation to GRACE House was just over \$4400 and enabled the purchase of eight wardrobes and a portable stainless steel countertop, bringing the facility into full compliance with State Health Department guidelines.

Fr. Francis Kabiru returned to St. Joseph's for a weekend in May, to promote the building of a new school in Kenya. C&J members set up displays and assisted volunteers from Walker by selling T-shirts to raise funds.

Project Care Free Clinic moved to a new location, increased hours and received a Blandin Foundation grant to hire an on-site coordinator. Collection of supplies for both the clinic and missions continued.

Work began in July on Community Connect. A proposal was written to the Diocese for a Brackin grant. The original intent for these funds was that they be used in the Grand Rapids area, so it was a good fit. With the \$750 grant, personal hygiene items could be purchased which are not available at local food shelves. St. Joseph's school children were involved for the first time and made fleece blankets. They were part of the 200 or so quilts and blankets blessed at a Mass in October. The fifth grade students visited the arena before it was open to the public, to learn about the event.

In November, a parishioner donated a Christmas centerpiece and requested that money be raised to benefit children at GRACE House. A handmade table runner was added, and \$1075 was donated for the drawing. This expanded the project far beyond some Christmas gifts, and led to *a community effort to establish a fund to serve children*.

# 2013

The year began with "*Making a Difference for Children*", a presentation at St. Joseph's, cosponsored with the Community Presbyterian Peace and Justice committee. Speakers from the Interfaith Advocacy Network and Joint Religious Legislative Coalition urged those attending to contact legislators regarding the welfare of children – one out of seven living in poverty in MN. The new GRACE House children's fund was introduced in the hope of involving more churches and community groups. Two C&J members began having regular meetings with shelter staff.

Fr. Bill Graham was invited to present a Sunday adult education class, "Vatican II -50 years". Eighty parishioners attended. Sherry Shadley, GRACE House director, spoke at a similar forum in April. She extended appreciation for the commitment of many parish volunteers as well as recent funding by St. Joseph's -- \$2000 to the Children's Fund in recent months.

We recommended that the second collections during Lent would go to the Grand Rapids Food Shelf and GRACE House – "Shelter the Homeless and Feed the Hungry". Both also benefitted from the egg bake and bagel brunch: the Food Shelf received \$9500 and GRACE House, \$1000. The need for more volunteers for both programs was stressed.

Two proposals were unable to be implemented. Research was done on the possibility of using the church kitchen for classes aimed at enhancing existing programs and creating new ones to promote healthy eating with Food Shelf products. Also, a great deal of information was gathered on continuing the Envision effort to have a Coordinator of Volunteers for parish outreach. A time and talent survey would update the previous directory of volunteers.

Plans for the children's playground at GRACE House were underway in April. ICC engineering students created the design, estimated at \$2500. The community stepped up with donated supplies and labor and a large grant from Home Depot. It was completed and being used by children in the shelter and in the neighborhood by August. The fund still contained \$3500 and was available to upgrade the indoor play space and provide necessary supplies.

Community Connect in October was very successful once again. Charity and Justice designed and presented a plaque to the ICC engineering department in recognition of exceptional service to the community. A member of Charity and Justice coordinated responses to needs –"Stop Hunger Now" (ICC students) and calls to the church office from people in need of help.

Jackie Solem proposed a new outreach program, *Ministry to the Dying*. With the pastor's approval, the new group was formed. Cheri Niles, a parishioner and experienced hospice nurse, conducted meetings and then two training sessions for seventeen volunteers. The Diocese was contacted concerning background checks and confidentiality agreements. An information card was designed to be given to nursing homes, assisted living homes and the hospital.

# 2014

In partnership with Earth Circle, a weekend was devoted to promoting ways to decrease the use of plastic bags. The information and display of reusable bags, prayers and stickers were well received. St. Joseph's joined other churches to provide over-flow beds for GRACE House during cold weather months and new volunteers were trained.

Three parishioners joined the mission trip to Kenya with Fr. Francis. Funds and school supplies were donated for the new elementary school, *Moto Hope Academy*. Half of the proceeds from the egg and bagel brunch, \$509, were included in the parish donation of \$1178. The almsgiving from the second collections during Lent was donated to the Food Shelf along with the other \$509 from the brunch, for a total of \$5205. With matching funds, the gift was substantial.

*Ministry to the Dying* was introduced to the parish in April and a second group of trained volunteers brought the total to twenty six. In the fall, some of the volunteers offered to be available to visit the sick as well as the dying. Two members of Charity and Justice are coordinators. They participated in roundtable meetings with the priests and representatives of other parish ministries. Plans were made for facilitating communication among the outreach groups to cover the services requested, including a form to be used by hospital patients. There is information in each bulletin.

Collection of supplies and a fundraiser were promoted for the Crisis Nursery. Tents and sleeping bags were gathered by GRACE House for use during warm weather. "The Pencil Tree" benefited individual children with backpacks full of school supplies that were distributed by the Salvation Army. The sixth annual Community Connect was another success, and St. Joseph's school children again made fleece blankets to be given away. Efforts continue to recruit more members of other churches and agencies in the planning of these events.