

WOMEN'S JUSTICE CIRCLES BLEND TWO FEET OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

BY BETH GRIFFIN



Photo courtesy of Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center

WOMEN WORKING WITH THE ANGLE LAKE FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER CELEBRATE THE CREATION OF A SPANISH-LANGUAGE TENANTS' RIGHTS ORGANIZING RESOURCE.

There are common elements to all community organizing efforts, but the most successful initiatives are those led by the people with the greatest investment in the outcome. As one organizer says, "We respect indigenous knowledge. It's the community that knows what they care about and what they need."

Twelve years ago, a coalition of Catholic religious communities with an impressive record of seeking social justice in the northwestern United States turned its attention to women on the margins of society, particularly Latina immigrants. Adjusting the traditional organizing model, the Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center (IPJC) helped low-income women form Women's Justice Circles to identify and address the conditions that keep them poor, unstable, and marginalized.

More than four thousand women in four dioceses in Washington and Oregon have now participated in

the grassroots empowerment process that brings formerly excluded women into the mainstream effort to promote change for the common good. The groups are led by low-income or immigrant women and those living in crisis or otherwise on the edges of society. They work in partnership with economically stable women from local faith communities to devise concrete steps out of poverty.

Women's Justice Circles receives funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) and was honored with the 2012 Sr. Margaret Cafferty Development of People Award. The CCHD award recognizes significant contributions to human development and heroic responses to the needs of the economically disadvantaged.

Sr. Linda Haydock, SNJM, the IPJC executive director, says Women's Justice Circles groups help women share their stories with one another and use

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends in Christ,

It is hard to look in any direction without hearing and seeing evidence of election-year posturing. During most of the incessant noise, the cries of the poor are often diminished, weakened, and silenced. Despite their perceived silence, the cries of the unborn, uninsured, unemployed, and uneducated persist. The public square seems to be deaf and unresponsive to these shrill and piercing cries. Rarely are the issues that keep people poor or marginalized discussed or negotiated in these often deafening discourses.



Jesus always gave special attention and a preferential emphasis to those who found themselves in most need: the ill, the lame, and those without resources to live to the fullest dignity that God invites us all to. Jesus continues to call us to focus our attention on the “least of these.”

In this election year, as in many past years, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops similarly calls us to turn our attention to those who need us most: the unborn, the hungry, the homeless, the ill, and the marginalized. In the document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the bishops offer Catholics guidance in making political decisions that are born from well-formed consciences in the light of our Catholic faith and tradition.

All decisions should be made in ways that would enhance the life and dignity of our brothers and sisters. There is no doubt the rhetoric will become loud, abrasive, and divisive. Through eyes of faith and a lens of Catholic tradition that leans toward those in need, we must take the debate to a higher level. A level that speaks on behalf of those whose voices are muted or ignored; a level that speaks for and with those who struggle for survival. Additionally, please keep in your daily prayers those sisters and brothers who struggle with no one to pray for them and those who work with and for them.

Thank you for your ongoing concern and support.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ralph McCloud'.

Ralph McCloud
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

For more information on *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, visit www.usccb.org (search “Faithful Citizenship”).

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Photo courtesy of Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center

WOMEN HELP IN A NEIGHBORHOOD BEAUTIFICATION PROJECT BY PLANTING A TREE FOR URBAN GREEN SPACES.

their voices to influence public policy. The Circles are drawn from participants in schools, churches, transitional housing, and social service organizations. “The program brings together people working for justice and social change and those working in charity and service. This blends the two feet of Christian discipleship: charitable service and systemic change,” Sr. Linda says.

Most of the women are urban Latina immigrants or rural Latina migrant workers, according to Giselle Carcamo, coordinator of Women’s Justice Circles. Some are homeless or survivors of domestic violence. “Women’s Justice Circles is a stepping stone in a holistic process to help women gain a more active role in society,” Giselle says. “It’s distinct from other programs, because low-income women take the lead, identify the specific conditions that oppress them, collaborate with others, and find ways to move beyond poverty.”

The essential foundation of the process is a series of weekly meetings held over two months to build community, identify strengths and collaborative power, explore justice issues, reach consensus on a goal, develop strategy to take action, rehearse, act, and reflect on the process. Women’s Justice Circles groups are conducted in Spanish, in English, or bilingually, depending on the needs of the participants. There have also been groups for Native American women and those who speak African languages.

Sr. Linda says the Women’s Justice Circles run as partnerships. “The majority of the leaders will be low-income, but the groups include women on the whole economic continuum. Economically stable women are seen as partners and mutual explorers of issues, not as advocates or advisors. They bring access to resources and a skill set that can be very supportive for women still trying to gain access to power.”

Women’s Justice Circles organizes in the Archdioceses of Seattle and Portland and the Dioceses of Yakima and Spokane in Washington. The organization has the enthusiastic support of parishes and bishops and has won CCHD diocesan and national funding. More than 55 parishes are now partners with the Circles.

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PRAYER BEFORE AN ELECTION

Lord God, as the election approaches,
we seek to better understand the issues and concerns
that confront our city/state/country,
and how the Gospel compels us to respond as faithful
citizens in our community.

We ask for eyes that are free from blindness
so that we might see each other as brothers and sisters,
one and equal in dignity,
especially those who are victims of abuse and violence,
deceit and poverty.

We ask for ears that will hear the cries of children
unborn and those abandoned,
men and women oppressed because of race or creed,
religion or gender.

We ask for minds and hearts that are open to hearing
the voice of leaders who will bring us closer to your
Kingdom.

We pray for discernment
so that we may choose leaders who hear your Word,
live your love,
and keep in the ways of your truth
as they follow in the steps of Jesus and his Apostles
and guide us to your Kingdom of justice and peace.

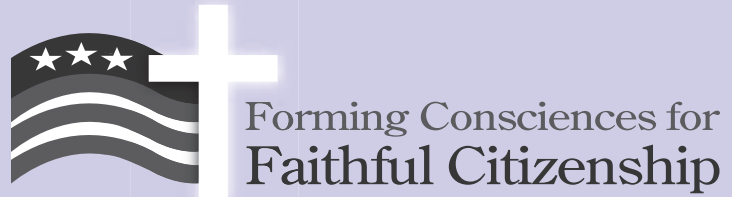
We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ and
through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Catholics Care, Catholics Vote

In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation." These words are from the U.S. Catholic bishops in their statement *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*.

Especially during an election year, people of faith working to fight poverty through CCHD offer an important witness of responsible citizenship. Their year-round efforts to advocate for solutions to poverty, often by holding elected officials accountable to the common good, are an inspiring example of participation in our country's democratic system.

During this election season, visit www.faithfulcitizenship.org to access resources to help all Catholics respond to our call to political participation.




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Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, MSpS, auxiliary bishop of Seattle, says, "The Circles are a wonderful gift in our parishes and the community at large, helping women to come together around issues of their God-given dignity and to act for the development of all peoples. I have been pleased with this significant partnership between CCHD and the Latina community, especially among those seeking organizing skills to create a better future for them and their families."

Among its successes, Women's Justice Circles counts actions to support affordable and farm worker housing, emergency shelters, educational testing, mass transit, community safety, and domestic violence prevention. In 2012, many of the Circles will focus on housing, domestic violence, immigration, and safe communities. Sr. Linda says it is a challenge to meet the needs of growing numbers of rural and urban Latinas. The groups have common threads with different

dimensions, she says, and are spread over a vast geographic area.

Nonetheless, Sr. Linda says locally led and mentored empowerment has proven effective in achieving systemic change. It's also a model that can be replicated elsewhere "without having to start from scratch," she says. Giselle has helped organize Women's Justice Circles in Detroit, Peru, and El Salvador, using a combination of radio, Internet, and phone communication. The leaders are trained using Skype connections, and women are mentored and supported from a distance.

Sr. Linda says CCHD "makes a significant difference in our ability to organize and also enables us to provide concrete examples and access to those in the pews to see the difference they're making when they support CCHD. CCHD funding helps marginalized women see that if you dream it, you can do it." 

What Is CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$280 million to more than 7,800 low-income-led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that

their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.