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Plain and simple, it's JustFaith

Demanding parish social ministry program transforms people, parishes, communities

By RENÉE LaREAU

Carol Zwaans quit two jobs and became a vegetarian. Roger Dunbar took a trip to El Salvador. Chacha Guerrero changed her shopping habits and patronized local businesses instead. Manson King convinced his parish to purchase a St. Martin de Porres statue to raise awareness of black saints.

What is it that has changed hearts and opened eyes in this way? What is it that inspired lifestyle changes among Catholics from California to Cleveland?

It's the radical Gospel call to care for the poor and vulnerable, plain and simple. Oh, and a wildly successful

In August, JustFaith participants of Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish in Endicott, N.Y., welcomed 17 New York City children for 10 days of outdoor activities in their community, located 150 miles northwest of New York City. The parish sponsored the children's visit in collaboration with the Fresh Air Fund, a nonprofit organization that provides summer vacations to children from the city's toughest neighborhoods.

program helps. Welcome to the world of JustFaith.

What started in 1989 as a fledgling parish program integrating spirituality and social justice is now its own nonprofit organization that boasts 7,000 graduates in 440 parishes and 84 U.S. dioceses. Though JustFaith's numbers are impressive, the program's real success can be seen in the sea change in the lives of individuals, families, parishes and the wider communities it inspires. JustFaith has inspired people to volunteer in their communities, write to their legislators, change their consumption habits and face up to staggering poverty close to home and abroad.

JustFaith participants, who meet for two-and-a-half hours weekly in small parish-based study and reflection groups for eight months, agree that the time commitment is daunting, but ultimately integral to the program's success.

"People are hesitant to sign up when they see the length of time required," said Marilyn Porcino of Incarnation Catholic Church in Centerville, Ohio. "But being together all that time -- you can't replicate it in any other way."

Porcino, a two-time JustFaith participant turned group facilitator, says that another piece of the program's success lies in the quality of the books, videos, articles and prayers used.

"The material has been uniformly excellent," she said. "It's so complete. I always thought I was reasonably aware of social justice issues until I started reading these books and watching the videos."

Inspired by provocative reading and ensuing small group discussions, each JustFaith participant seems to have been touched by a different part of the program. For Carol Zwaans of Huntington Beach, Calif., a close reading of *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* by Ronald J. Sider (W Publishing Group, 1997) convinced her to give up eating meat for good.

“It’s a dangerous book,” Zwaans said. “It changed my whole way of thinking about my role as a consumer. I learned that it takes nine pounds of grain to feed a cow that makes one pound of meat, and that nine pounds of grain could feed so many more people. Once I learned things like that I just couldn’t eat meat anymore.”

Around the same time, Zwaans left her jobs at a mortgage broker and a bank because of the soul-searching that JustFaith inspired.

“There are a lot of shady things that go on in the mortgage business and I just couldn’t put up with it anymore,” she said.

For Manson King of St. Mary Parish in Lorain, Ohio, reading *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* by Paul Kivel (New Society Publishers, 2002) prompted him to be an advocate for Catholics who shared his African-American heritage.

“It was an awakening, an awareness, an examination of conscience,” King said. “I looked around my church, and I saw no black role models. They had statues of St. Teresa, St. Paul, the Blessed Mother. They were all lily white!”

King broached the subject to St. Mary pastoral associate Pat Shullick and pastor Fr. Dan Divis, who worked with King to find an artisan-made statue of St. Martin de Porres for St. Mary, a working-class parish 30 miles west of Cleveland.



Manson King with the statue of St. Martin de Porres in St. Mary Parish in Lorain, Ohio

“He’s one of my favorite saints,” said King, “and I feel like I’ve got to tell his story to people. And if I’ve opened one person’s eyes, I’ve done my job.”

For Chacha Guerrero of St. Ignatius Parish in Austin, Texas, JustFaith prompted her to change her shopping habits. “As a mom, a working person, I’m always looking for cheaper prices on things,” she said. “But now I will actually pay a little bit more for things” rather than buying from big companies known for exploitive practices.

Founded in 1989 by director Jack Jezreel, JustFaith partners with Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. Jezreel created the 30-week intensive program from scratch, handpicking the more than 25 books and videos shaping discussion questions that cover everything from globalization to racism to poverty and modern-day saints.

Jezreel, inspired by the success of a lengthy process like the parish-based catechumenate program, set out to create a program that would set itself apart from the typical sparsely-attended parish social concerns community meeting. His proposed solution? Demand more of people’s time and brainpower.

“Many parishes are hurt by the tyranny of small expectations,” Jezreel said. “We say, ‘People are busy so we need to make sure our programming is short, convenient and abbreviated.’ But if you read the Gospels with any kind of integrity you see that the Gospel is not any of those things.”

JustFaith is a program that raises awareness of Catholic social teaching and the biblical tradition of justice, but participants are on their own to determine how they will respond in their own lives.

Related Web site

JustFaith

www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/justfaith

Roger Dunbar of Incarnation Catholic Church in Centerville, Ohio, after watching the movie “Romero” with his JustFaith group, decided to sign up for a trip with CRISPAZ, Christians for Peace in El Salvador, to learn more about the martyrs in that country.

Dunbar, who also started teaching English as a second language at his parish to Spanish-speaking people in the area, said the impact of Romero and other martyrs was palpable among the Salvadoran people. “Everywhere we went we saw very driven people who had a strong sense of wanting to do something with their lives,” he said.

Some JustFaith graduates decide to devote their energy to alleviating the poverty in their own backyards. Larry Curtis of Lafayette, La., chose to attend his first city government meeting when he learned that a nighttime city bus service was in danger of being halted. “The people who needed the night bus service were working during the evening meeting,” Curtis said. “So five of us decided that we would be their voice for that issue.”

Prior to his participation in JustFaith, Curtis said, he never would have given night bus service more than a passing thought.

“I would have been one of those people reading about it in the morning newspaper the next day, saying ‘What a shame,’ and moving on,” he said. “But now I know that 30 percent of my city’s population lives below the poverty line, and I can’t look the other way anymore.”

Renée LaReau is the author of *Getting a Life: How to Find Your True Vocation*. She writes from Columbus, Ohio.

‘Like a new Pentecost’

JustFaith inspires people to make big changes in their lives, changes that have injected new life into parishes and dioceses by fostering greater participation. NCR asked some parish and diocesan staff about how JustFaith affected their communities. Here’s what they had to say:

“It’s like a new Pentecost -- there’s a whole new spirit that has come out here. JustFaith helps the parish be about what it needs to be about: outreach and ministry and social justice, issues in the neighborhood. In a downtown church like this we see a lot of needs.” -- Fr. Dan Divis, pastor, St. Mary Parish, Lorain, Ohio

“JustFaith has changed the face of social ministry. There are more people writing letters to legislators and they are more informed when they do it. More people are reading more things. That means I’m being challenged in my work more than I ever have before.” -- Suzanne Belongia, director, Social Action Office, Winona, Minn., diocese

“We had over 200 people at a meeting on urban sprawl, which is hardly a thing that I thought was at the forefront of people’s minds. JustFaith has quadrupled our group of regulars. Meetings that used to have 20 to 40 people now have 100 to 250 people. When I ask the group who has been through JustFaith, there’s not a hand in the room that doesn’t go up.” -- Cori Thibodeau, regional director, Social Action Office, Cincinnati archdiocese