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**TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES: FAITH BASED SOCIAL JUSTICE  
GROUP WORK WITH HOMELESS**

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**Transforming Communities: Faith Based Social Justice Group Work with Homeless Adults**  
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This paper presents a qualitative study of a homeless “social justice group” founded by members of a Christian faith community. While social justice is a concept that is frequently described in social work literature, few case studies exist on social justice oriented group work, particularly with the homeless population. We will examine a social justice group that was founded on the Judeo-Christian values of welcoming the stranger, defending the needy or oppressed and loving thy neighbor. The group met monthly at a McDonalds in Northeast Los Angeles over a period of three years. The group leaders were both human service professionals and lay church leaders. Group participants included several church members and several homeless neighbors.

This study examines how the group experienced transformational relationships with their homeless neighbors, leading to individual and community change. Outcomes of the group are described using observations and leaders narrative accounts, as well as qualitative interviews with group participants. Interview questions focused on exploring the impact the group had on participants, particularly member’s views of homelessness, and whether participants felt the group succeeded in bringing about greater social justice for homeless members.

In this study group leaders defined social justice through the lens of Judeo-Christian faith. Jewish and Christian scriptures teach the value of welcoming the stranger (hospitality), defending the needy and oppressed (solidarity & justice) and loving your neighbor (charity), particularly neighbors who are vulnerable and marginalized. The following review of the literature was made, using the following key terms, “social justice” and “group work” and “religious faith”.

According to the NASW website, (2011), “social justice is the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities. Social workers aim to open the doors of access and opportunity for everyone, particularly those in greatest need”. While social researchers have traditionally promoted fair distribution of economic goods as the primary means to promote a social justice, beginning with Rawl (1970), more recent authors suggest this is not enough. Swenson (1998) argues that while social justice is “the organizing value” of the social work profession, we should not only be concerned about redistributing economic resources but social resources, (i.e. non-economic goods) such as self-worth, dignity and other psychological goods.

Recently, authors Singh and Salazar (2010) analyzed themes from 20 different articles on social justice group work. Their analysis suggests several areas for future exploration and development of leaders of social justice groups. Of particular interest to our study was their suggestion that social justice group leaders need to expand their cultural competence to embrace *community* and *organizational* interventions, not just *individual* interventions (Singh & Salazar, 2010). What models currently exist in the social work and psychology literature of group work that integrates social justice principles and interventions? We found a few, for example *the Dimensions of Social Justice Model* (Ratts, Anthony & Santos, 2012) and the *Emancipatory Communitarian Way*, (Brubaker, Garrett, Rivera & Tate, 2010). In 2010 the Journal for Specialists in Group devoted an entire issue to integrating social justice principles in

group work. In their keynote article, Crethar, Torres Rivera and Nash (2008) conducted a review of the group counseling literature and concluded that social justice work is commonly defined by four common principles: *equity* (fair and equitable distribution of resources, *access* (the right of individuals to access services, information and power), *participation* (empowering individuals to make decisions that directly impact their lives) and *harmony* (the idea that we all have value in society).

Judeo-Christian religious teachings and practices on social justice can help inform social justice group work. However, in reviewing the current social work literature, few case studies have been published on social justice group work by faith-based organizations. Todd and Allen (2011) recognized the need for "...a closer examination of the mediating role that religious congregations serve in society, especially in relation to the promotion of social justice." In a meta-analysis by Hodges (2007) he concluded that, "there is a paucity of literature in social work on the intersection between social justice and religion, even though the profession's code of ethics articulates the need to advocate for social justice and eliminate religious discrimination". In fact, Hodges went on to conclude that while many social workers are interested in addressing religion in their practices, there is a lack of corresponding frameworks, and treatment models on social justice practices. We hope that this study can provide ideas for a new model of social justice interventions in group work, while also expanding the role faith-communities play in promoting social justice.

## METHODS

In our student we define social justice from both a social work perspective and a Christian faith perspective, which group leaders found very compatible. Group leaders decided on a non-institutional, community based approach when they began the group, and saw themselves as "co-learners", rather than "professional experts".

The group met monthly at a McDonalds in Northeast Los Angeles over a period of three years. Initially the group format and membership was open and inclusive, but later new members were only invited subject to approval from the entire group. While some homeless participants were more transitory than others, the group maintained several consistent core homeless members. The group included nine young adult professionals from a local church and seven homeless adults. A breakdown by ethnicity is as follows, 81% Caucasian, 6% Asian Pacific, 6% African American, 6% Hispanic. The group was composed of nine females and 7 males, and 7 members were homeless and 9 members were church congregation members. For inclusion in the study, participants must have been actively attending and participating in the social justice group for a period of three months. All participants meeting these criteria were invited to participate. Group participants were pre-screened by the investigator to assess if they were appropriate for the study, i.e. voluntarily willing to participate, mentally competent to participate, and fully informed of the purpose and risks of the study before giving their consent to be interviewed. Unfortunately three former homeless participants were recently deceased, and one was incarcerated, which poses a limitation on the data the investigator was able to collect.

Structured interview questions were used to assess how the social justice group experience impacted participants, and were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis. Church member participants were asked the following research questions: 1) How did the group experience impact you? 2) How did the group experience impact your view of homeless? 3) In what ways

was the group successful in furthering social justice at an individual level and community level?  
4) What challenges did group members encounter along the way?

The group originally was started by two church lay leaders in 2005. Mr. Belluomini was a marriage & family counselor and Mrs. Bartlett was a director at a transitional housing program. They originally invited several friends from a local Northeast LA church to form a group to read and learn about social justice. After several months of studying together, Belluomini shared how his social justice paradigm shifted, "I realized that justice is not only the actions we take on behalf of and with the oppressed, but also in *how* and *with whom* we gather. I felt led to make our group one that gathered with the oppressed as a way to seek justice", (C. Belluomini, personal communication, March 2012).

In 2006 the group leaders decided to begin reaching out to marginalized and oppressed people in their local community. Lay leaders took a unique approach. Group leaders began walking the local neighborhood talking to people they met, which led to forming friendships with several local homeless adults. In fall 2006 leaders invited their homeless friends to gather together around a common meal to share their stories and explore their needs as a group. The core principle guiding them was described by Bartlett as, "doing social justice is not separating it from those you are serving, but it is done with them. Rather than figuring out a project and then going for it, immerse yourself with some of those people that you care about, and start to partner with them in their own restoration" (L. Bartlett, personal communication, March 2012).

The social justice group leaders founded and structured the group on the following principles:

- Non programmatic, non-institutional and non-hierarchical
- Relational, "being with", coming alongside and sharing a meal as equals
- Culture of hospitality and welcome, creating a sense of belonging
- Showing solidarity by "being present with"
- Not promoting a religious or social agenda
- Approaching group as co-learners, not experts.
- Inclusive and non-judgmental, value of acceptance
- Empowerment focused, giving homeless a voice and asking them to identify community solutions

These principles are similar to other social justice oriented groups described in the social work literature. According to Singh & Salazar (2010), "Group leaders are aware of the potential for interactions to facilitate empowerment, growth, and change. Social justice is similarly collaborative in nature, emphasizing empowerment, self-determination, advocacy, and change," (p.97.) Group leaders began the group by inviting homeless participants to share their experiences and asking them what their needs were and how the church and community at large could respond to meet those needs. This invitation was key to winning the trust of homeless neighbors and making them feel valued. As Bell (2007) aptly describes:

The process of social justice also should be one that is democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human capacity to work collaboratively to create change. This requires that group leaders create an inclusive group environment where members feel affirmed and are a part of the decision-making process in group. (p. 2)

Group leaders also looked to Jewish and Christian scriptures to inform their social justice views and group principles. Group Leader Belluomini shared how as church lay leaders they were inspired by a quote from Rabbi Jonathon Sacks (2005),

The message of the Hebrew Bible is that civilizations survive not by strength but by how they respond to the weak; not by wealth but by how they care for the poor, not by power but by their concern for the powerless“.

"Greatness, even for God, -and certainly for us- was not to be above people but to be with them" (C. Belluomini, personal communication, March 2012). Although the group was founded by professionals acting as church lay leaders, from the outset the group did not have a religious agenda. Spirituality was integrated through an informal closing prayer in which participants were invited to share prayer needs or state things they were grateful for.

#### OUTCOMES: COMMUNITY IMPACT

“At a community level we began meeting with other churches either already involved with homeless ministry or desiring to be. These meetings took on a life of their own,” (C. Belluomini, personal communication, March 2012).

Out of open dialogue and intentional inquiry the group learned that homeless participant's greatest identified need was not food insecurity but gaining regular access to showers and bathrooms to maintain their personal hygiene. Secondary to this the group learned that while most homeless were able to obtain their daily food through a combination of food stamps or pan-handling and recycling, being able to have a hot, nutritious meal was much more difficult. Food stamps could not be used to purchase hot meals at the grocery store deli. Homeless neighbors resorted to using a local convenience store microwave; however the store manager became suspicious and began discouraging homeless from entering his store. At the time, three local churches offered hot meals one night of the week. Homeless participants suggested approaching other churches to add additional meal ministries to cover other evenings during the week.

After several months, the social justice group contacted local church leaders and invite them to participate in a community meeting at the local town hall. The community meeting was attended by members of the local Catholic, Presbyterian, Foursquare, Episcopal and Covenant churches. One of the group participants, a homeless woman, was invited to speak and share her concerns. The meeting resulted in local churches organizing a collaborative faith-based network named “Churches Assisting Neighbors” which resulted in two churches adopting hot meal ministries that following year. In addition, the group attended local city council meetings accompanied by homeless neighbors to share concerns and advocate for greater fair treatment of homeless. Group leaders were the invited to submit a grant proposal to the city to request funding for a mobile shower unit.

#### OUTCOMES: GROUP PARTICIPANT IMPACT

“At an individual level we attempted to erase any status barriers between us and them. Similarly a second goal was to restore any human dignity they may have lost due to their circumstances,” (C. Belluomini, personal communication March, 2012).

The strongest theme that emerged from the interviews with church participants was the recognition of the power and importance of human relationships over programs and ministry. Participants each remarked on how the unique structure of the group allowed for them to experience transformational cross-cultural relationships (Table 1.1). Eight of the church participants implicitly or explicitly stated that these friendships with homeless neighbors changed their perceptions (“they are just like us”) and increased their awareness of societies stigmatization and marginalization of homeless (“they are often treated unfairly”).

TABLE 1.1

**Question: How did the social justice group with homeless neighbors impact you?**

“... Realizing that they are just like us, they have family issues, and just weird social things that they are living with, or just sort of trying to get by every day” (B.V.)

“I found our homeless friends to be more relational and coherent than I expected them to be. I am not sure when it was or how it occurred that they became my friends. Meeting with them weekly became like meeting any one of my other friends, I looked forward to seeing them”, (C.B.)

“When we started spending time with them and building community, I realized how real they are, how human they are, going through experiences in their own lives, going through struggles, challenges, like with relationships, families, jobs, kind of made them seem more on the same level” (K.B.)

“..Changed my view of them, less seeing them part of a certain population now instead seeing them as a human being” (KB).

“..Decreased my stereotypes of homeless people i.e.... all are drug users, or out to beg for money” (A.G.).

“..It made a way for me to stop referring to people as homeless. The labels we give people are the things that went away the most, it changed how I view homeless, now I see them for people they really are” (B.A.)

“In a lot of ways they were just as intelligent as I was, just in different areas. At first I felt like I needed to down play where we lived or what kind of car we drove, but after a while I thought I wouldn't do this for any other friend. After a while I became less interested in that and more interested in them”. (J. A.)

I realized I really have no clue how painful their lives are, not just lack of food, lack of sanitation, but just lack of basic love and feeling desired by other people, that you are worthy to be loved. That changed my viewpoint of how blessed I have been.” (L.G.)

Remarked one participant,

I have never been a person to judge people, always been a person who is open, doesn't discriminate, but it is hard when you see someone on the side of the road, there is so many things that come between you and them, and this group allowed some of it to all break down. We were friends with them, I think that's the biggest point, we were not just out there giving them stuff or getting them to do something, or provide services, we were actually just trying to be friends with them, and genuinely make a friendship and everything that entails with that, this allows, requires a lot more knowledge about the person and a lot more time to share with them. (B. Van Gorp, personal communication, September, 2012).

A major theme that emerged from interviews with participants was how the group increased their awareness or critical consciousness of societal privilege, inequality and discrimination. Over the course of the three years that the group met, church participants learned first-hand of some of the struggles and challenges their homeless neighbors faced every day. Individual accounts of injustices experienced by homeless neighbors covered a broad range of issues, including:

- Community negative profiling, stereotyping homeless individuals as criminals
- Neighbors complaining to officials about homeless presence - NIMBYism
- Discrimination at restaurants and service establishments
- Police & public works harassment, false charges or confiscation of personal property
- Hospital & healthcare: lack of access and poor treatment
- On the streets: public shaming, avoidance of eye contact, verbal and non-verbal derogatory remarks/behavior

One church participant summed it up like this: “It made me more aware of the lack of services that are available, lack of concern for people in these situations, how people write them off or minimize the real intensity of their situation”. For some church participants in the beginning of the group awareness of socio-economic status differences made church members feel uncomfortable talking about their own lives & daily challenges. This ceased to be a distraction as group relationships deepened. A limitation of this study was the investigator’s inability to interview each the homeless participants. However, one key informant who was herself homeless and a very active member of the group shared the following when asked how the group impacted her:

It changed my view of church people as hypocritical or out to push their religious agenda. [The group] helped me because there was someone to talk to. I have gone through major challenges as they all know...it could have very easily made me go back to certain things I did in my past, but just knowing I could pick up the phone and call them, it was like intervention. That hour of crisis I could have picked A or B, but that hour talking to church people, I picked B...and thank God and I haven’t done it...” (Homeless Neighbor, personal communication, April 2012)

Group lay leaders summarized the following ways in which they observed the group impact homeless participants:

#### Benefits of Social Justice Group

- Consciousness raising: around issues of power, privilege, socio-economic injustice
- Individual empowerment and advocacy
- Solidarity with those who suffered injustice
- Community organizing leverage
- Shared resources
- Restored individual dignity & worth
- Increased social support
- Positive role-modeling
- Opportunity to engage in difficult dialogues

#### CHALLENGES

Emerging themes in regards to some of the challenges encountered in social justice group work with homeless neighbors included difficulty with consistent group attendance due to the transient nature of homeless neighbors lives on the streets. In addition, while none of the core homeless participants in the group exhibited mental illness, several of them directly or indirectly disclosed struggling with substance abuse. One member occasionally showed up to the group intoxicated, and this was addressed by the group leader pulling him aside and talking to him. On a few occasions, conflicts broke out between homeless participants, over allegations of theft or perceived betrayal of loyalties, which would result in avoidance or arguments. In these instances group leaders would attempt to explore concerns with each participant separately and work toward reconciliation.

Another challenge was respecting homeless neighbor's choices, even when their lifestyle choices such as health practices and end of life decision making, seemed to be detrimental. Unhealthy lifestyle choices ultimately led to the untimely death of two of the homeless participants, and two others became terminally ill and had strong feelings about not contacting their family after their death. The group members explored their feelings, provided emotional support and ultimately honored their wishes.

## CONCLUSION

The impact the social justice group had on the community was significant. At the end of three years, as a result of the group efforts, an inter-faith church network was established, two additional churches began providing free hot meals, the group collaborated with local churches to establish yearly indigent burial/memorial services, a homeless community & social services resources list was created and distributed to local churches, a Family Promise network was established in area, (several churches agree to house homeless families on a rotating basis), and the local city government increased their awareness of the need for more services. Lastly, the local community increased their awareness of homeless needs through town hall meetings, homeless guest speakers at local non-profit events and a published newspaper article.

During the life cycle of the group, church participants dealt with a series of significant events, including homeless participant's healthcare crisis, family conflicts, substance abuse issues, the death of two of the homeless participants, relational conflicts, and legal and ethical dilemmas. These events resulted in lessons about faith, human dignity and worth, empowerment, respecting people's right to self-determination and the power of unconditional acceptance. The majority of participants reported that the group focus on authentic relationship building with homeless neighbors rather than focusing on programs, social or religious agendas was the most impactful aspect.

This quote by Poe (2007) summarizes how the social justice group work with homeless impacted church lay leaders in their professional and personal views:

Social justice is a foundational concept for both social work practice and Christian faith. Justice as a legal term connoting fairness, especially in the distribution of and access to resources, has been the dominant conceptual framework through history. [However], these approaches to social justice have directed attention away from the most fundamental meaning of justice—the restoration of right relationships. We need to go

beyond justice as fairness to describe justice as an ideal that reflects the human longing for wholeness and harmony in social relationships. (p. 471-472)

In conclusion, this study provides examples of creative and practical ways faith based communities can engage in social justice in the future, in the context of mutual relationships to improve the lives of homeless residents.

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