

A Brief Background and History of Social Action in the Diocese of Cleveland from 1969-2014



Housing. Economic Justice. Racial harmony. Peace. Human Dignity. Hunger. Homelessness. Poverty. Many of the social justice concerns of today are not different than those of 45 years ago, when, in 1969, under the direction of Bishop Clarence G. Issenman, Bishop of Cleveland, Auxiliary Bishop William Cosgrove established the Commission on Catholic Community Action (CCCA) with a dedicated group of laity and religious.

The Commission, as the official social action arm of the Diocese of Cleveland, was charged to provide education/ formation, organizing and advocacy in the areas of poverty, peace and race. The scope of the Commission is best captured in this brief description written in 1969, ... Out of a gospel context, the CCCA strives to promote peace, social justice, and the common good by engaging the Catholic community and others of good will in actions that result in social change.”

Since its inception, social action ministry in the Diocese has been guided by the Holy Scriptures, encyclicals of the Holy Fathers, Catholic Social Teaching, pastoral statements of the U.S. Bishops, the Ordinary and the Ohio Bishops. In addition, there has been a longstanding history of working cooperatively and effectively with ecumenical and interfaith leaders and structures.

In 1972, Bishop Cosgrove appointed the first members of the Akron Catholic Commission. Both the CCCA and the Akron Catholic Commission were formed in response to the Second Vatican Council and the documents of the Council, particularly *Gaudium Et Spes*.

During the late 1980's, under the leadership of Bishop Anthony M. Pilla and Fr. Walter J. Jenne, Director of Catholic Charities, social action offices were opened in Wooster (covering Wayne, Ashland and Medina), Lorain (covering Lorain County) and Lake County (covering Lake and Geauga Counties).

In 1989, Diocesan Social Action was formed to serve as the administrative/management arm of the five Catholic Commissions. In 2007, the Diocesan Social Action Office (DSAO) was comprised of the five Catholic Commissions, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Catholic Relief Services, the Rural Life Office, the Diocesan Education and Training Center for Social Justice and the Diocesan Council on Global Solidarity.

Though names and faces have changed over the past 45 years, the commitment to justice has not weakened. In fact, social action in the diocese of Cleveland is strengthened by its history and is as committed as ever to work in constantly evolving ways. Justice education, advocacy, consciousness raising and working toward empowerment dominates the faith-filled journey.

The Diocesan Social Action Office benefits from the generosity of more than 50 lay, religious and clergy who volunteer. They are advisory to the staff members who direct the various offices. These volunteers are formed by the values and principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Each Commission provides regular updates on the encyclicals of the Holy Father, pastoral statements of the Ohio Bishops and the Ordinary, and the positions of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Some members are graduates of the “Sowers of Justice: Leadership for the Common Good” program, a leadership program designed by DSAO members in the late 1990’s.

In addition, the Commissions have been greatly served and counseled through the active involvement of Bishop A James Quinn in Lorain, Bishop Roger Gries in Cuyahoga County and Bishop Martin Amos, when he was assigned to Summit County. Currently Bishop Richard Lennon, Bishop of Cleveland and Pat Gareau, President and CEO of Catholic Charities Corp. continue to lend their strong support to the work of social action.

The history of Social Action is marked by numerous accomplishments. What follows is merely a brief summary of some of the accomplishments over the years:

- ✚ Advocacy (joined by a broad based state coalition) that resulted in the passage of State Issue 1 that declared housing a public purpose in the State of Ohio. This resulted in the establishment of the Housing Trust Fund, which provides \$ 50 million in funding for first time home buyers, and programs that serve the homeless.
- ✚ Advocacy that resulted in the establishment of Healthy Start in the State of Ohio. This provided medical coverage to low income Mothers and their babies.

- # Advocacy (joined by the Catholic Conference of Ohio) that resulted in Governor Ted Celeste commuting the death sentences of more than 15 persons on Death Row.
- # Advocacy (joined by the CCO) that resulted in the defeat of living will legislation at the State level due to its lack of provisions regarding patient “informed consent” and because its proponents were the Euthanasia Federation of America.
- # Advocacy (joined by the CCO and USCCB) against the passage of partial birth abortion bills at the state and federal levels.
- # Advocacy (joined by the CCO) that assisted in ending the boycott of Campbell’s soup and resulted in a historic agreement among migrant workers, the company and growers.
- # Advocacy that resulted in the establishment of the Disability Medical Assistance Program in Ohio.
- # Organizing that resulted in the formation of the Ohio Coalition for Responsible Lending, which is intent on passing legislation that would regulate payday lenders in Ohio.
- # Advocacy that resulted in the defeat of legislation in the Ohio General Assembly that would have been predatory to Ohio Consumers.
- # Advocacy that defeated the passage of concealed carry legislation in the State of Ohio. (A bill was finally passed through efforts of the gun lobby).
- # Organizing that resulted in the establishment of the Immigrant and Minority Business Alliance
- # Advocacy and education with the Earned Income Tax Credit Coalition that resulted in thousands of low income persons receiving a tax refund when the credit was given only to those who specifically asked for it on the tax return.
- # Organizing that resulted in one of the most successful gun buyback programs in the nation in which 1,500 guns were taken off the streets in a four day period.
- # Support to the Bishop of Cleveland in providing education on the Economic and Peace pastorals of the United States Catholic Bishops.
- # Support to the Bishop of Cleveland resulting in the formation of a Council of 100 business, labor, civic and church leaders from throughout Northeast Ohio as part of

the implementation of the 1986 pastoral letter of U.S. Bishops, entitled Economic Justice for All.

- # Support to the Bishop in conducting training workshops at the district level on racism and race relations. The workshops articulated Church teaching and practical ways for parishes and priests to act upon the reality of racism.
- # Support to the Bishop that resulted in workshops for Catholic school teachers on multicultural diversity training, and conflict resolution consistent with Catholic Social Teaching.
- # Support to the Ohio Bishops in drafting several pastoral letters over the last 25 years.
- # Organizing that resulted in the Immigrant Worker Project and the Tri-diocesan Immigrant Council.
- # Advocacy that resulted in passage of the minimum wage ordinance in the City of Cleveland.
- # Support for the Community Re-Entry Program in addressing the needs of the previously incarcerated.
- # Advocacy that resulted in halting the establishment of a toxic waste dump in a rural area of the Diocese.
- # Advocacy that resulted in the highest level of County general assistance payments to the poorest of the poor.
- # Advocacy that resulted in the establishment of a Consumer Affairs Office in Summit County that focuses on predatory and payday lending.
- # Organizing that resulted in the reopening of a Dental Clinic for low income, uninsured children and families.
- # Organizing that resulted in the establishment of the first Diocesan Council on Global Solidarity in the nation.
- # Organizing that has resulted in the establishment of approximately 50 non-profit, community organizations that have greatly improved the quality of life for thousands of poor families and individuals throughout Northeast Ohio. (The DSAO has formed a food bank, a shelter for the homeless, six housing related organizations, and First Friday Clubs in Akron and Lorain. These organizations are

established through collaborating with numerous community and faith based organizations; they are separately incorporated, secure their own funding sources and operate independently).

- # Advocacy that resulted in the collection of more than 5,000 petitions that were presented to the President and the United Nation's Secretary calling for an end to the horrific genocide in Darfur.
- # Advocacy that resulted in increased citizen participation in the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) process and greater emphasis on affordable housing.
- # Advocacy that resulted in passage of an ordinance that assisted low income renters who were dislocated through eminent domain.
- # Organizing that resulted in the formation of the first Diocesan Land Use Task Force in the nation. Drawing heavily from Catholic Social Teaching, the task force crafted ethical principles to guide land use decisions.
- # Service to the Bishop as the lead staff for implementing the *Church in the City* pastoral statement and plan. The DSAO staff served in this capacity for a seven year period.
- # Organizing that resulted in the sponsorship of a Lenten Series on Africa and a second series focusing on Christians in the Holy Land in which more than 2,500 parishioners attended.
- # Organizing that resulted in the establishment of Faith House, a transitional housing program for women.
- # Advocacy in cooperation with the diocesan Pro Life Office that resulted in the most comprehensive, local anti-abortion ordinance in the nation.
- # Stewardship of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development that has resulted in over \$1.25 million in grants to local community organizations who empower the poor to advocate change that helps them overcome poverty.
- # Education that has resulted in the development of the highly acclaimed "Sowers of Justice: Leadership for the Common Good Program." DSAO have also helped organize and sustain numerous parish, social concerns groups.
- # Education and training that has resulted in approximately 500 Catholic school teachers becoming better informed about Catholic social teaching.

- ✦ Organizing assistance that resulted in the formation of Catholic Students for Peace and Justice, a network of the 20 Catholic High Schools in the diocese working together on social justice events and projects. The first Poverty Summit was held and attended by 1,000 students. A Second Summit on Invisible Neighbors, in 2013, attracted more than 700 students.
- ✦ Design and development of one of the first Diocesan peace and justice web sites in the country
- ✦ Asked by the Communications Department of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to feature and film CSPJ students for a national DVD/video on Youth Ministry as they spoke about their local and international service and advocacy efforts for peace and justice at the FEST, the event which gathers more than 20,000 youth and families at St. Mary's Seminary.
- ✦ Planned and worked with the Catholic Conference of Ohio to hold the first state-wide gathering of Catholic leaders addressing Global Climate Change keyed by Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Apostolic Nuncio, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations.
- ✦ Co-sponsored the Arctic Voices Global Warming Tour at John Carroll University which was a forum discussing the human and social effects of global.

Current Priorities and Highlights

- ✦ Highlighted a new CCHD grant from Lorain County, 'Gardens' of Eatin' initiative of twenty gardeners, St. Peter's Parish, North Ridgeville parish garden, and the Grafton State Correctional Institute's Horticulture Program. The CCHD grant is a collaborative effort between Grafton Correctional Institute where the prisoners grow the plants. The parishes purchase the plants for a small fee. The parishes in turn, work with parish gardeners to contribute a certain portion of the harvest to several parish food pantries and food co-op projects in the area.
- ✦ Serve on various committees of the Greater Cleveland Fair Trade Network on planning for the 2013 Fair Trade Expo. Highlighted the work of Catholic Relief Services as a national leader on Fair Trade. Compiled a list of workshops, presenters, vendors and how to expand the Girl Scout Patch Program and the work of CRS into the program.
- ✦ Organized and ran the Pilgrimage for Immigration Reform in Lake County, working with more than twenty volunteers, to provide speakers, music, the prayer service programs and more than fifty signs which demonstrated the biblical and

theological commitment to welcoming the stranger in the spirit of the gospels. Over 200 participants from the dioceses of Cleveland and Youngstown as well as students from St. Ignatius High School.

- ✚ Currently on the steering committee that is considering re-starting the **Akron Area Association of Churches**, as well as planned programs for the Summit area on nutrition, children and success in school. Speakers were from the Akron Public Schools and the Community Health Department. Focus was on WIC and school lunches as well as how churches can help fill in the nutrition gap.

- ✚ Convened Catholic Charities Social Services of Summit County, the Summit County Department of Jobs and Family Services to coordinate services for persons working with the elderly and parish staffs resulting in renewed and more coordinated services in this area.