

## **Viewpoint: Justice & Peace activism in need of formation by Paul Donovan**

The recent annual National Justice and Peace Network conference drew more than 350 people to spend a weekend debating food security. It was a great opportunity to network with others working for social justice across the Church and beyond.

A question that sprang to mind was just how is the work of social justice in the Church being conducted at present? Attending the NJPN conferences it is difficult not to see it as an ageing movement, still made up of the children of the 1960s and 70s. This generation has faithfully struggled to live out the teachings of Vatican II but where are the new people, where's the renewal? How many parishes actually operate justice and peace groups now? The commitment at diocesan level is certainly pretty sketchy with few diocese having workers and some lacking commissions. There is a definite belief amongst the hierarchy that while doing social justice is a constituent part of practicing the faith, but in terms of resourcing it is an added extra that can be done without. CAFOD has been a big backer of justice and peace over the years, providing funding for workers and the NJPN. Recently though CAFOD has seemed less enthusiastic in its support, whilst continuing to utilise the very valuable network that NJPN offers.

A more recent player to emerge on the scene has been the Citizens Organising Foundation (COF) with its community organising via groups like London Citizens. This has proved a good way of getting whole parishes and schools signed up to the work of social justice. The living wage, regularisation of undocumented workers and debt reduction have all been valuable campaigns. Many J&P activists are active members of this organisation which is planning to expand out across the UK. What is lacking though is any real formation of people engaged in the work of social justice. The days when CAFOD actively pushed the pastoral cycle with its experience, analysis reflection, action and celebration aspects seem long gone. The pastoral cycle was widely used by Christian communities pursuing justice based on liberation theology in Latin America. There was real formation in terms of social justice and the political sphere in which it operates, centred on a firm foundation of Church teaching.

Now unfortunately such formation work has given way to rather superficial campaigns that often involve deluging government ministers with postcards imploring them to act. Whilst this has a place, it should be an end in itself. It needs underpinning with justice theology and should be seen as a starting point to go on to something else. Community organising is no better at providing a process for the formation of people. It targets people in parishes with control of the purse strings. Once signed up, a few people are selected for leadership sessions but the organisation as a whole operates in a very disciplined hierarchical way. Member schools and parishes are summoned to fill out big halls for assemblies that are incredibly stage managed affairs, with no questions from the floor allowed. Community organising is more of a method than a process.

It was process and formation of people in the work of social justice that used to be so prevalent in justice and peace. This seems to have been lost. It is almost like running around like headless chickens wanting "to do" all of the time without any reflection or analysis. There is a feeling if we do enough - whether that is buying fair trade products, marching, protesting or acting ethically - then the world will become a better place. Whilst at one level this is no doubt true, at another the question of why the world is not a better place arises, and what motivates people to wish that it would.

The challenge for J&P is to get that process of formation back, that ability to analyse what is going on in the world and work out a process as to how to inculcate transformative kingdom values into that world. There is an urgent need for these formation processes to begin again at a number of levels. There is the challenge of getting more people involved. Then there is the challenge of how people are moved on once they become engaged. Many want quick fixes, rather than putting in the time, looking at the structural causes of the problems and acting. Work for social justice is a lifelong commitment not a quick fix.

It is high time that the Church recognised this commitment and devoted some proper resources to the formation of communities steeped in social justice. At present this vital work is being too easily sidelined.

For more information see: [www.paulfdonovan.blogspot.com](http://www.paulfdonovan.blogspot.com)