

Congregational Social Action Committees:

Suggestions for Formation and Planning

By Edward R. Canda and Phillip Dybicz

Introduction

Many religious congregations have a commitment to enhance the personal and social well-being of their membership and the larger community and world. This Resource is intended to help religious congregations to form or expand committees that plan and implement such health and justice initiatives. We hope that it will be useful to a wide range of religious groups and traditions, especially those that support comprehensive views of health and social justice.

In particular, this Resource has been designed for use in conjunction with Session 8 (“The End is Just the Beginning”) of the book Health Through Faith and Community: A Study Resource for Christian Faith Communities To Promote Personal and Social Well-Being by Edward R. Canda, Aaron Ketchell, Phillip Dybicz, Loretta Pyles, and Holly Nelson-Becker, published by The Haworth Pastoral Press, New York, 2006. *(To find a complete description of this book and ordering information, go to www.haworthpress.com. In the “quick search” field, click on “books” and enter the book title, Health Through Faith and Community.)* References to sessions or activities relate to materials in that book. However, this Resource can stand alone, without limitation to that book or a particular religion.

The Resource provides suggestions, questions for reflection, and steps for forming the committee, identifying resources, deciding goals, and moving forward with action plans. It builds on insights and goals for action that may have been generated by participants throughout the eight sessions included in the book. Session 8 of the book invites participants to make a commitment to individual action plans and to identify possible interest in forming an Action Committee. This resource can assist with follow through on these commitments.

We incorporated some insights from the following useful chapter: “The Faith-Based Community Action Model” by Terry Tirrito, in Religious Organizations in Community Services: A Social Work Perspective, edited by Terry Tirrito and Toni Cascio, pp. 171-190, Springer Publishing Company, New York, 2003.

Sponsorship of this Resource

This resource is hosted on my (Edward Canda's) faculty website at the University of Kansas (<http://www.socwel.ku.edu/canda>). In my role as a faculty member of a state affiliated university, I am not promoting adherence to any religion. However, I do support diverse spiritual communities in their efforts toward health, well-being, and justice for all people. This resource and the related book are products from the Health Through Faith and Community Project, which was funded by the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund of Hutchinson, Kansas (<http://www.healthfund.org/>). I have great appreciation for the UMHM Fund and their Christian vision to promote health and health care access for all Kansans. Please see the complete Spiritual Diversity and Social Work Resource Center (<http://www.socwel.ku.edu/candagrants/HFC4.htm>) for more information on the ways that a variety of spiritual traditions are involved with social work, health, and social welfare.

Step #1: Forming the Committee

(Note: Even if a similar committee already exists in your congregation or religious group, please review Step 1 for suggestions that might help to refine its functions and goals.)

A.) Identifying Leadership and Participants

1. Someone needs to take initiative to begin forming the committee. A few leaders from the congregational study groups that used this book (or have otherwise formed a common interest) could meet to discuss the insights and interests generated during the study process or other prior discussions. The initial meeting could be used to decide how to proceed with forming an Action Committee.
2. A leader or facilitator for the Action Committee should be designated. This person would take responsibility for scheduling and coordinating future meetings.
3. Once a core of group members is established (perhaps 4-8 people), invitations can be issued to the congregation more widely. Some people who participated in the study groups may be especially

valuable members, given their prior reflection on personal and social health issues.

4. It may be useful to invite some people to join this committee who are active leaders in other religious congregations and health and social service organizations in the community. They can provide insights and representation from the local community.
5. A full committee of 8-15 people could be established, along with a schedule of planning meetings. Too many members would make it difficult to conduct meetings. It is wise to include representation of a variety of clergy and lay members and a diversity of personal backgrounds and perspectives. It is also important to consider whether the members can work well together as a team.

B.) Individual Roles and Logistics

The committee needs to make early decisions about the following issues.

1. What roles/responsibilities are to be shared by all members equally?
2. What roles/responsibilities will be assigned to an individual? (e.g. chairperson, treasurer, someone to take minutes, and other tasks).
3. What type of leadership structure will the committee have? (See Activities 5.3 and 5.4 in the book for some ideas).
4. In what ways will the organizational structure of this committee be similar to existing congregational committees? In what ways will it be different?
5. If funding will be needed, how can it be obtained? Can existing congregational funds be used or will new fundraising be necessary?

C.) Time and Place

What day and time will the committee meet on an ongoing basis? How often? At what location?

D.) Attending to the Spirituality and Health of the Committee

Outside of the particular issues being addressed by the committee, how will the operating style of the committee itself be infused with a sense of spirituality?

Consider ways that various spiritual activities can be incorporated, such as prayer, meditation, spiritual readings, adopting a spiritual symbol to represent the group, or conducting committee meetings like spiritual retreats.

Are there ways to incorporate some of the personal dimensions of health explored in the book within the process and style of the committee meeting? That is, how can the meetings themselves be attentive to and supportive of the well-being of participants?

E.) Mission Statement

It is common for organizations and committees to create a mission statement to capture the broad vision and goals of their efforts. We have explored a very broad and holistic definition of health in this book. Try to develop a mission statement for the Action Committee that reflects insights about connections between spirituality, personal health, and social well-being.

F.) Process for Decision-Making

Under what circumstances will the committee decisions be made? By democratic process? By secret or open ballot? By continuing to discuss until consensus is reached?

What decisions will not require a vote; that is, can be made executively by a single individual? Who should have this authority?

Brainstorm ways in which to infuse spirituality within the decision-making process. For example, what prayers or rituals can be adopted to underscore significant decisions and commitments? How can prayer or meditation be used to keep participants centered, attentive to each other, and open to inspiration?

Step #2. Create a Directory of Existing Congregational Activities Addressing the Community Health Domains Discussed in This Curriculum

Use worksheet #1 at the end of this Supplemental Resource as an aid in creating this list.

Step #3. Brainstorm Existing Strengths and Areas of Need

A.) Strengths

Use the list created from Worksheet #1 to help in identifying areas of strengths, talents, and resources in the congregation. Use the following questions to help in the brainstorming.

Who are congregation members with demonstrated talents, enthusiasm, and skills regarding the issues you would like to address?

What are the existing resources of your congregational community?

What avenues are open to possible coordination and/or partnerships with existing activities?

B.) Areas of Need or Goals for Change

Identify possible areas of need and goals for change that are not now addressed by the congregation. Reflection on insights from several activities in the book may yield ideas.

For example, review study groups' ideas about ways to enhance:

- Physical health (Session 2)
- Mental health (Session 3)
- Spiritual health (Session 4)
- Congregational community well-being (Session 5)
- Societal well-being (Session 6)
- Global well-being (Session 7)

C.) Setting Priorities

Using the results of your brainstorming sessions, begin prioritizing the areas/issues that you would like to address.

Recommendation: Start with one issue/area that is amenable to a short-term achievable goal. A quick and early success is important in fostering a sense of group empowerment and fueling continued motivation.

Step #4. Developing and Monitoring Action Plans

Use worksheet #2 to help in developing a timeline of achievable goals.

Recommendations:

- It is always a good idea to have specific activities to accomplish by next meeting (as a way for the group to mark their progress).
- Identify community resources, service agencies and key people with whom you will need to cooperate in accomplishing goals.
- Form collaborations with other religious congregations, service organizations, community grass-roots leaders, business leaders, and political representatives for accomplishing large scale goals.
- The Action Committee members may solicit help from the wider congregation in order to accomplish goals.
- Consider alternative possible solutions and strategies for accomplishing goals. Reflect on results of actions and modify plans as needed.
- Provide feedback to the congregation leaders and key stakeholders in the community about progress on goals.
- Celebrate accomplishments.

Additional Resources

Numerous supplemental resources are available that address connections between spirituality and personal and social well-being from the standpoint of Christian denominations, other religions, and scholarly research. These can be found at the Spiritual Diversity and Social Work Resource Center (<http://www.socwel.ku.edu/candagrants/HFC4.htm>).

Worksheet #1

Directory of Existing Congregational Activities

This worksheet can be used for group members to write down initial ideas. These can be compiled and detailed in a longer directory.

How is your congregation already addressing needs found in the following categories? Identify each activity for these needs, the congregational group that carries out the activity, the relevant contact person. This will help you to determine what else needs to be done and who has experience in the congregation that may be of help. For example, if the congregation already provides a food pantry, what other kinds of material assistance might be needed in the local community?

Individual and Family:

Congregational Community:

Local Community, County, State:

Nation:

World Community:

Worksheet #2

Creating an Action Plan

Set an attainable goal. Each meeting, monitor actions taken and level of accomplishment. Keep the plan flexible and change it as new information and resources develop. Be willing to alter the plan whenever necessary to make it more realistic. Adapt this goal setting worksheet as needed.

Issue to be addressed or area of need identified:

Our Goal:

1.) By _____ (next meeting) we will achieve the following:

Specific Actions to Complete:

Volunteers/Resources Needed:

2.) By _____ (e.g. 1 month) we will achieve the following:

Specific Actions to Complete:

Volunteers/Resources Needed:

3.) By _____ (e.g. 3 months) we will achieve the following:

Specific Actions to Complete:

Volunteers/Resources Needed:

4.) When the goal is accomplished, or the process is going smoothly, set a new goal.