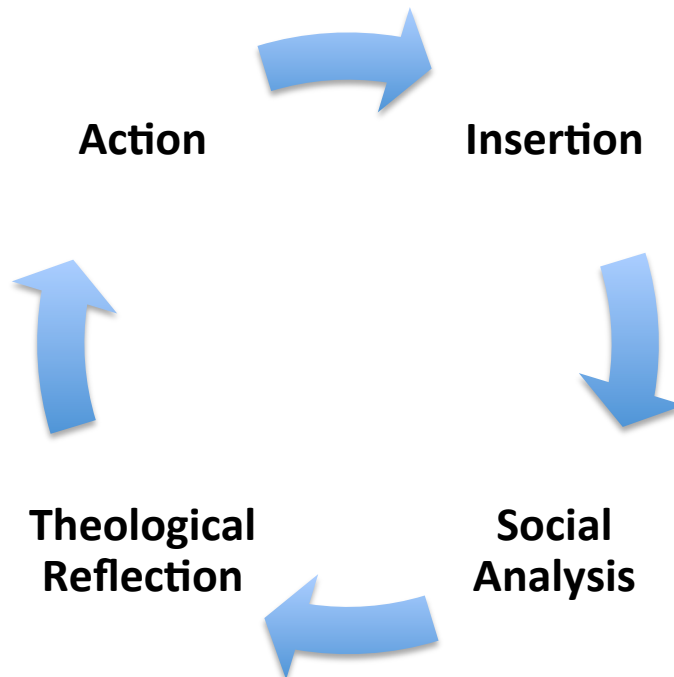


Linking Faith, Action, and Social Issues

What leads people to apply their faith to social issues? First, they need to be connected – they need to be personally impacted by the issue, or at least feel how it effects others. Second, they need to understand the issue well enough to believe that their response will make a difference. Third, they need a sense of direction and hope, a sense that as large as a problem may be, it can be whittled down to size when people of faith work on it together. The four-step process developed by Peter Henriot and Joseph Holland offers a framework for helping families apply their faith to social issues. The process begins with insertion – our experience with an issue/injustice, moves to social analysis and theological reflection on the issue/injustice, and culminates in action – working for social change and serving those in need. (*Social Analysis – Linking Faith and Justice*. Joseph Holland and Peter Henriot. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980)



Insertion

The first step in the process – and the basis for any action – is Insertion. Through Insertion we identify our experience of social issues in our family, community, and world. We try to feel and understand how the social issues affect our family and touch the lives of others who are affected. Getting in touch with what people are feeling, what they are undergoing, and how they are responding to the situations they find themselves in – these are some of the experiences that constitute Insertion.

The entry point for analyzing and acting on an issue may be 1) an event – an experience of injustice; 2) an issue – hunger, poverty, environment, the arms race; 3) a set of problems – economic deterioration of a neighborhood, pollution; or 4) a question – why does poverty persist in the richest country in the world? Sometimes we begin naturally with the experience of the family on a particular issue, providing them with the opportunity to express their feelings and thoughts about their experience. In other cases we will need to provide activities that connect families with the issue to be explored. This will mean simulating the experience of injustice, helping families “feel” the issue being analyzed, or expose families to what is happening in the local community, helping them to “hear” and “think” from a

broader perspective. Once families are connected with an issue, they are ready to move to analysis, to ask the “why” questions from a first-hand perspective.

Questions to help people surface their experience:

1. What is our personal experience of this issue or concern? Have any of our family or friends experienced it? What was the experience like? How did it impact how they felt about themselves? How did it impact how they felt about others?
2. If we haven't personally experienced this need, where do our information and feelings come from? Can you point to any specific article, story, song or video about the issue that struck you? What do we know, as a group, about this issue? What questions do we have?
3. What feelings do we connect with the issue? Why do people experience this injustice or issue? Could it happen to you? Why or why not? What does it do to people? How does it make them feel? How does it make us feel?
4. What are we doing personally to change this situation? Are there ways we are already involved around this issue? How? Where?
5. How do we see the issue being dealt with in our local community? Does the issue touch us at all? How? Where?
6. What are the thoughts and feelings of the people in our local community, state or nation about this issue? How are these thoughts and feelings shared? Do they have any impact on what we think or feel? Why or why not?
7. What is being done in our local community, state, or country to change this situation? Is it enough? Too much? Why?

Analysis

Analysis is a means of widening our reflection on our experience to search out the relationships between values, events, structures, systems, ideologies. It goes beyond our immediate experience to probe the historical roots and future implications of events and issues and systems. The task of analysis is to examine causes, probe consequences, and delineate linkages rooted in the structural realities which condition our experience and limit or expand our freedom of choice. Analysis helps us become persons who habitually ask *why* in the face of human suffering and injustice. We learn to look for causes, relationships, structural realities in order to understand a plan for effective action for change.

Questions to help people analyze an issue:

1. History: How long has the problem, issue or injustice been with us? How has it changed through the years? Does anyone benefit from the present situation? Who suffers?
2. Economics: What influence does economics have on this issue? Who controls the resources (natural and human resources, manufactured goods and money) involved? Who benefits economically from this situation? Who suffers?
3. Politics: What influence does politics have on this issue? Who has the critical decision-making power in this situation? Who benefits? Who suffers?
4. Culture and Values: What values are at work, or absent in this situation? Who benefits from these values? Who suffers?
5. Connections: Are there any links between the economic, political and cultural structures? Does money have any influence on how political decisions are made? Do any existing cultural values or beliefs work against change in this situation?

Reflection

Reflection engages families in exploring the issue from the perspective of faith—the Bible, the social teachings of a denomination, the resources of the Christian tradition, and the lived faith of the church

community. This step involves people in exploring what faith says about particular social issues. It involves them likewise in exploring what the faith community is doing about social issues and what motivates its response. Reflection should call forth not just an intellectual assent to faith, but a commitment to incorporate it within one's life. The witness of committed individuals can go a long way toward making reflection real. The Word of God brought to bear upon the situation challenges old ways of thinking and responding by raising new questions, suggesting new insights, and opening people up to new action possibilities.

Questions to help people reflect an issue:

1. Religious Values: What are the religious beliefs and values that seem to be at stake in this problem, issue or injustice? What beliefs and values lead you to say, "Things shouldn't be this way!"
2. Scripture: How have the values you identified been reflected in the Bible? How has God's Word of justice been revealed in the history of the Hebrew people? How was this issue approached by the teachers, prophets or psalmists of the Hebrew Scriptures? What did Jesus say or do when confronted by the same or similar instances of injustice? What can be learned from the life of the early Christian community as it tried to fashion a new community around Jesus' teachings and lifestyle?
3. Church History and Tradition: The Christian Church's understanding of God's justice continues to grow and develop through time. In the course of its long history, has the church community been faced before with the challenges raised by this issue? When? How did the church respond? What principles or approaches are set forth in the social teachings of your denomination?
4. The Church in Action: Like Jesus, the Christian community speaks not just through what it says, but by how it embodies its words in action. What is the Church doing locally, nationally, and internationally to respond to the short or long term problems created by this social issue or injustice? Why do Christians work to relieve the problems caused by this issue or injustice?

Action

New experiences and ways of thinking lead naturally to new ways of living and acting. It is these new ways of living and acting that the fourth movement of the process is all about. Action means helping people survive their present crisis or need *and* addressing the root causes of the problems. Working at a soup kitchen or food center, visiting the elderly or sick, and tutoring children are common examples of direct service. Direct service needs to be coupled with actions aimed at removing the causes of the problems that direct service is addressing. Legislative advocacy, community organizing, and working with organizations that are changing the structures that promote injustice are examples of social change actions. For example, families who are working at the homeless shelter and soup kitchen could also be involved with the local coalition for the homeless which is working to create housing, employment, and just policies for the homeless. In this way families will experience the benefits of working directly with the homeless *and* learn to change the system which keeps people homeless. Real change will come about only when we work together to alleviate the present suffering caused by an issue/injustice and organize our energies to eradicate the causes of hunger and poverty.

Action on particular problem, issue or injustice brings about new experiences – insertion – which call, in turn, for further analysis, reflection, and action – each time building on and extending previous insights and experience. The process is more like a "spiral" than a "circle" – leading individuals and communities deeper into applying their faith to social issues.