



Planning Guide for Graduate Gatherings

(Rev 09-09)

This document is designed for use by leadership teams and JustFaith graduate planning groups. It offers a template and model for gathering graduates.

Background

Many JustFaith graduates come away from their JustFaith experience profoundly changed. They deepen their compassion for and commitment to the poor and develop a keen sense of responsibility for ending their suffering. They deepen their prayer life. They form strong and meaningful bonds with the other members of their JustFaith formation group. Above all, however, they increase their understanding of the social mission of the Church and become committed to social ministry: serving the poor, both by direct service and by working to change unjust systems and institutions.

However, living the Gospel is challenging. Crafting a life that applies our faith to the injustices of the world is difficult. In the United States, we live in a culture that chooses not to see the poor and that urges us to live in excess while so many have so little. We will certainly continue to be influenced by this culture. Therefore, it is important that we continually examine and deliberately structure our lives so that we may live in solidarity with the poor.

One of the ways we can best do this is by seeking out and remaining in the company of others who are attempting to orient their lives in this same way. At the root, this is JustFaith's rationale for recommending regular Graduate Gatherings of JustFaith graduates.

Beyond providing individual graduates with opportunities to live out the changes of heart that they have experienced in JustFaith, bringing graduates together opens up the possibility to alleviate suffering and bring change that is possible only by groups of individuals directed to a certain cause or activity. Many can accomplish things that one or two alone cannot. By bringing JustFaith graduates together, we provide the opportunity to share experiences, discover common passions and hopes and, together, work for change.

The Hope for JustFaith Graduate Gatherings

The hope for JustFaith Graduate Gatherings, then, is twofold. First, that individual JustFaith graduates continue their spiritual journeys and are enabled to engage in social ministry. At the same time, however, we hope that graduates will develop networks with each other and with staff from Catholic diocese offices and others around common passions and activities that will lead to groups of JustFaith graduates engaged in social ministry together. Accordingly, Graduate Gathering organizers should arrange the Gathering agenda with the following characteristics in mind:



Informative and Practical

Each gathering should seek to further graduates' understanding of a certain issue and/or activity. These issues and activities can be local, regional or even national. The object, however, is to make the presentation of the information relevant to graduates' experience, and then to offer practical ways that they can get involved. It is also an opportunity for diocesan staff to inform graduates of local happenings and issues and engage them in some diocesan activities.

Inspirational

Beyond mere facts, figures and the logistics related to getting involved, the presentations at the Graduate Gatherings need to be inspiring. Our lives are so busy; the demands made upon us by work, community, friends and family—while mostly important—are many and considerable. We will make room in our lives, however, when an idea or opportunity captures our imagination, speaks to the values and beliefs that we hold at our center, and holds out to us the possibility of living out those values and beliefs. The Graduate Gatherings must be crafted in such a way as to inspire graduates, to allow the Spirit to breathe into graduates, and kindle or rekindle the flame of love and compassion.

Prayerful

The path to inspiration, to an indwelling of the Spirit within each participant and within the Graduate Gathering itself, is through prayer. Each Graduate Gathering should include a rich prayer experience. Rich prayer, however, requires deliberate preparation. While the particulars of prayer will vary from group to group and meeting to meeting, rich prayer experiences have common characteristics: the use of meaningful symbols, reflective music, poignant readings from scripture and spiritual writers, an opportunity for personal reflection, a balance of word and sound and silence. Many resources exist for developing rich prayer experiences. The point, however, is to craft a rich experience that will open graduates to the Spirit among them at the gathering.

Relational

Going to all the trouble of gathering graduates together in one place would seem pointless if they did not have an opportunity to interact with each other. While that seems like common sense, we have all been to gatherings where such interactions were taken for granted—and then never really occurred. Graduate Gatherings must provide specific and deliberate opportunities for graduates to renew acquaintances and friendships, form new relationships, discover common experiences and interests, and begin to develop networks and form community. These gatherings are also great opportunities to help build, or further enhance, a relationship between graduates and diocesan staff.

Fun

Many graduates see the world differently after their JustFaith experience, often through the eyes of the poor and vulnerable. Certainly such a worldview is sobering—and standing in solidarity with such as these is difficult in many ways. Still, many find that there is a consolation in attempting to live out their JustFaith experience, as difficult as that may be sometimes. They experience hope—even joy—in new ways. Graduate Gatherings need to reflect that hope and joy. Providing an enjoyable experience that is also informative, inspirational and prayerful will



increase their desire to continue their own journey and join their journey to those of their fellow graduates.

Components of JustFaith Graduate Gatherings

In order to meet the hopes and goals discussed above, Graduate Gatherings should include the following components.

Prayer: A meaningful experience that opens a place for the Spirit dwelling within the gathering.

Compelling speakers: The gathering should provide several opportunities for a variety of speakers:

- ***Featured speaker:*** A person with a compelling story that will both inform and inspire the graduates.
- ***Local testimony:*** A person or two who has a JustFaith success story. Someone who is living out the call that they received during their JustFaith experience in a particularly interesting and compelling way. Consider the connection between these testimonies and any theme or focus of the gathering.
- ***Challenges and opportunities:*** A person enlisting help with a current project, activity or mission. Could range from very challenging (a border crossing into Mexico) to less challenging (organizing a Thanksgiving potluck for the homeless).
- ***Local diocesan directors and agencies:*** People from the local Catholic Charities office, CRS diocesan or regional office, and the CCHD office for a *brief* update (five to ten minutes) on their work and, perhaps, opportunities for graduates to engage their work.

Opportunities for reflection: These pieces of the Gathering agenda can occur in different places on the schedule. They could be part of the prayer experience. They could be part of small group discussions following the featured speaker. They could be part of a segment in which graduates recall their experience of JustFaith and share how it has impacted their lives.

Opportunities for networking and community building: These opportunities can also occur at different points in the meeting. Certainly they will exist as graduates gather and share refreshments. However, more deliberate opportunities to form relationships can come during prayer, small group reflection following a speaker—even specific activities whose only purpose is to get the graduates to know one another. As the group continues to gather, JustFaith graduates will become more familiar with each other. At this point graduate gatherings should feature ways to more deliberately connect people with each other and the work or projects they are engaged with. This could be for education or even recruitment and may include break-out sessions, caucuses, etc.

Opportunities for diocesan updates/news: Some diocesan staff have an opportunity to share information with graduates on local diocesan issues and opportunities for engagement.



Opportunities to promote JustFaith programs. The gatherings are a way to increase the engagement of more people in social ministry and to strengthen existing parish social ministry programs. Examples of how to do this would include supporting or organizing JF introductory workshops, volunteering to form or co-facilitate a new JustFaith group in your parish, highlighting new JustMatters modules that are available for small group study, or participating in other JF programs—Engaging Spirituality, JustSkills, or working with youth and young adults in JusticeWalking.

Opportunities for additional updates/news: These opportunities exist in presentations made by other, non-diocesan speakers at the gathering. Organizers of graduate gatherings should also provide an opportunity for the local groups to exhibit and distribute materials. Many groups have found this a good opportunity for information tabling for local organizations and agencies.

An Agenda for a Typical Graduate Gathering

It should be understood that not every gathering needs to include every single option within each of these components. Rather, each gathering may emphasize certain aspects from meeting to meeting, depending on the theme of a particular meeting, speaker availability and the agenda of previous meetings. That said, certain things should happen at every meeting:

- prayer,
- a compelling speaker,
- information about options to get involved, and
- opportunities for interaction and community building.

1:00 to 1:30 PM	Gathering with light refreshments
1:30 to 1:45 PM	Welcome and logistics
1:45 to 2:15 PM	Prayer
2:15 to 2:45 PM	Update on local JustFaith graduate activities and an opportunity to talk about new JF program promotion and organizing
2:45 to 3:00 PM	Update from diocesan staff or local agency representatives
3:00 to 3:15 PM	Break
3:15 to 3:45 PM	Featured speaker
3:45 to 4:00 PM	Q&A with featured speaker
4:00 to 4:30 PM	Small group discussion about speaker's topic or other small group activity.
4:30 to 4:45 PM	Announcements, including date and location of next Gathering
4:45 to 5:00 PM	Closing Prayer



Organizing the Graduate Gathering

Having a Graduate Gathering is not difficult, but it does require careful planning and a certain amount of logistics. The organization of the Gathering centers around four fundamental activities:

(1) Forming a Graduate Gathering Organizing Team

Because of the logistics involved, pulling together a Graduate Gathering simply cannot be done well (or with any degree of sanity) if only one or two people are involved in its planning and execution. The organizing team may be coordinated through a diocesan office that has worked closely with JustFaith groups. In some areas, the diocesan staff may work with local graduates to identify a *team* of at least five organizers.

In any area, an effective approach to getting a solid group of possible members for the organizing team is to call a larger initial meeting of JustFaith graduates. Identify as many folks as possible and invite them to a conversation about this plan to organize JustFaith graduates. The purpose of this initial meeting is to talk about the graduate gatherings and to get the buy-in of a pool of organizers. This approach is also recommended in areas where there is little support from a diocesan staff.

After a an organizing team is identified, responsibilities among the team members could be divided as follows:

- Working with diocesan staff to identify items for the agenda and help plan the gathering
- Finding a location, securing refreshments, and assembling set-up and clean-up teams
- Contacting speakers and agencies and securing commitments
- Publicizing the gathering to Graduates
- Composing and providing the prayer and reflection experiences
- Overall team and agenda coordination

Most groups find that at least monthly planning meetings are important. But at the very least, one face-to-face meeting at the beginning of the planning process to draft the agenda and assign responsibilities is necessary. These meetings may be called by the diocesan staff person or JF graduate leader(s). At least one other face-to-face meeting of the “working groups” just before the Gathering would likely be necessary. Some communication among the team members in between these meetings may be accomplished via email and telephone conversations. An additional face-to-face meeting of the team should occur after the Gathering to evaluate both the Gathering itself as well as the process of pulling the Gathering together.

Then the task is to begin (or continue) the process for the next scheduled gathering which is only a few months away!

It is important that the planning process be spread as much as possible to avoid burnout and to develop leadership. Many hands make lighter work. If possible, rotating the hosting location between JustFaith “parishes” is a good idea. Then the “local arrangements” aspects of the gatherings (welcome, logistics, setup, sound, etc) can rotate to local and knowledgeable allies.



Some groups find a benefit to have a steering committee with rotating leadership. Other helpers and working teams can turn over in the process more freely but someone needs to keep track of the big details, set agendas, and do essential planning work between gatherings.

(2) Determining the agenda

The agenda for a graduate gathering must be tailored to a particular situation and group of graduates. As stated above, a Gathering that is both helpful and inspirational to JustFaith Graduates must include certain elements. The emphasis within and around these elements will vary, depending on speaker availability, diocesan activities and needs, local opportunities for involvement, what was done at the previous Graduate Gathering, and the like. The emphasis here is on providing a worthwhile experience that will engage Graduates individually and collectively.

(3) Contacting graduates

Getting the word out to graduates may be the most challenging aspect of pulling together a Graduate Gathering—at least the first and second time around. Local diocesan staff that has been working with JustFaith Ministries will most likely be able to provide an initial list of graduates in the area. Check with JustFaith program facilitators and parish formation ministers to round out the list. (You can contact the JustFaith Ministries office for help in identifying former co-facilitators and getting a roster of graduates and their contact information.)

At every Graduate Gathering provide an opportunity for graduates to update their contact information and supply any contact information they may have about other graduates who were unable to attend.

A recommended sequence for getting the best turnout would include:

- A “save the date” notice for one or more meetings already planned. This can be sent via email.
- An invitation for a gathering already planned should be sent in both email and paper. Make sure the invitation notes the speaker, food and other points that will make the event more compelling. Consider an RSVP to get their attention and its important for planning food.
- An email reminder two weeks before the event
- Follow-up phone calls with the statement “We want so see you. Will you attend?”
- As many as 10-20% of people will not respond until these last two steps.

In time, after you have had a few meetings and as graduates become more interested in and accustomed to gathering, perhaps a phone tree could be developed to inform graduates of Gatherings and other events.

(4) Obtaining the speakers

Each Graduate Gathering can have a range of speakers, from a compelling keynote type speaker to brief presentations about local work from local agencies and individuals. The key is to provide the Gathering with speakers that will be edifying as well as enlightening. Some things to think about as you consider speakers:



- What is going on in the community right now? Is there an event or issue that is getting a lot of attention?
- What is going on at the diocesan level? Are there specific programs that are being emphasized right now?
- What are JustFaith Graduates doing these days? Has an individual Graduate or a group of graduates done something particularly interesting and inspiring?
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Create a speakers pool for planning. Think ahead of people in your area who are great speakers, key animators and issue leaders. These folks are in demand so ask them in advance as soon as you get dates. Some Catholic dioceses also require speakers to be approved before being invited to speak at a parish function.

Tools and Tips

JustFaith.org web resources. JustFaith provides templates and document samples collected from various groups which have organized graduate gatherings. These are available for reading or downloading at <http://justfaith.org/GraduateGatherings.html>. Documents include sample invitations, agendas, worship and prayer resources and other organizing tools (surveys, networking tools, evaluations, etc.)

Food is important! Sharing food reflects hospitality and nourishment. However, some food options are more difficult than others. Pot lucks are always good for fun and great food. But they are also very labor-intensive and can take up a fair amount of meeting time (standing in line, serving, eating). They require considerable effort by the organizers for setup and cleanup (keeping them from being active participants). Consider some meetings with “easier” options: light snacks or deserts and beverages or pizza delivered. Easier food options can provide more time for table discussions and other activities.

Prayer. This includes some attention to the prayer space, symbols and ritual. Some groups use variations of their favorite prayers from a JustFaith session. Opening and closing prayer could also be related to the theme of the speaker or other topics discussed at the gathering.

Variations on a theme. Depending on the local reality, some local planning teams may decide that some meetings during the year should have a different template or focus. For example, one meeting could be a “welcome” or convocation for new program graduates, two could follow the recommended template and one would be an action/reflection opportunity focused on a local issue or initiative.

Timing is everything. In the first stages of planning graduate gatherings, think ahead and try to schedule meetings ahead, even a whole year at a time. Being able to “save the dates” for these meetings will help more people attend meetings. Working around summer and vacation schedules is always a challenge. Consider this interval: late August, November, February, and May.

Prepare speakers. Spend some time in advance with those who are invited to give testimonies or reports from local diocesan directors and agencies. Brief them on the purpose of the



gatherings, what is expected from their comments, time limits and a reminder to arrange to have copies of materials they would like to distribute.

Finances. These gatherings always cost money. A diocesan office or parish may pick up the expenses for refreshments or even a speaker's fee. But other costs could include postage, copying, name tags and other incidentals. Consider a free-will offering at each event. An ideal solution is to set up a separate "organizational checking account" under the name of the JustFaith graduate group. More substantial donations can then be requested and deposited into the account to cover expenses as planning evolves. This fund will also keep the process going if parish or diocesan support is not forthcoming.

Organizing the Graduate Gathering: A Checklist

Four Months before the Gathering

- Diocesan staff and local graduates work together to form the organizing team and begin planning.

Note: Diocesan staff time may be limited, especially as it relates to the rest of this checklist, but the involvement of diocesan staff from the start is important.

Cast a wide net for the first organization meeting to see who is excited about the possibilities and to create a larger pool for JF related organizing! If there hasn't been a graduate gathering before, it may take a little extra effort to gather the tribe and build enthusiasm for the planning.

- Request current rosters for JustFaith graduates and facilitators from the JustFaith Ministries office.

Three Months before the Gathering

- Have the first meeting of the organizing team
- Set the Gathering agenda
- Set the time and place of the Gathering
- Send "Save the date" notes to graduates (email)
- Assign responsibilities to the individual organizing team members and expanded work groups

Two Months before the Gathering

- Secure the featured speaker
- Secure agency and other speakers for local updates
- Identify MC for event
- Determine which agencies to invite to table and invite them
- Begin developing the prayer experiences
- Begin developing the Q&A sessions and/or small group sharing sessions
- Begin informing graduates about the Gathering individually (email, mail, word of mouth) Ask for an RSVP.
- Begin informing graduates about the Gathering through the media (e.g., diocesan newspaper)



- Check in with the organizing teams

One Month before the Gathering

- Check in with speakers: confirm dates, topics, etc.
- Finalize the prayer experience
- Finalize the Q&A sessions and/or small group sharing sessions
- Continue informing Graduates
- Check in with the organizing teams and firm logistics details for the meeting host/location

One –Two Weeks before the Gathering

- Arrange for access to the gathering location
- Telephone reminder to graduates who have not given an RSVP for the event.
- Check in with speakers for the last time
- Compose an evaluation sheet to distribute at the conclusion of the meeting
- Meet with the organizing team to go over all meeting details

One Week after the Gathering

- Meet with the organizing team to evaluate the Gathering and celebrate! Begin planning for the next event; rotate leadership if appropriate.

Frequently Asked Questions

How often should we have Graduate Gatherings? JustFaith Ministries encourages graduates to get together at least twice each year. Graduates have expressed a desire to continue their personal spiritual development, become engaged in social ministry, and form relationships and networks with other graduates. Bringing graduates together less frequently would not meet these needs as fully.

Where can we find speakers? A good place to begin would be the diocesan peace and justice office, Catholic Charities, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development office or a CCHD funded group, and the Catholic Relief Services office or one of its regional offices. These offices should be able to provide some leads. In addition, each of these organizations should be willing to make a presentation at future Graduate Gatherings.

Can JustFaith Ministries help us contact our local graduates? Most local JustFaith diocesan contacts already have the graduate contact information. If it is not available through the local diocesan contact, you can obtain it from the national JustFaith Ministries office.

Can JustFaith Ministries provide funding for Graduate Gatherings? Currently JustFaith Ministries does not have the resources to provide funding for these Gatherings. However, we can provide advice as you pull the meetings together and help you troubleshoot issues as they arise.



Are these Gatherings for JustFaith Graduates only? Can we open them up to anyone who is interested in coming? What about family members? JustFaith Ministries suggests that you limit the meetings to graduates at first. This will allow you to focus your efforts on themes and topics of interest to that particular group. The danger in opening the meeting to others—at least in the beginning—is that you will be bogged down in trying to provide a range of content to a wider constituency. Keep it simple in the beginning.

Inviting current (graduating) JustFaith participants may be a good idea for a Spring meeting. For some gatherings, consider also inviting JusticeWalkers or JustMatters module participants.

Regarding family members, we encourage you to make one of your annual Gatherings an event for the whole family, with activities and speakers selected for that specific purpose.

How many Graduates should we try to gather? All of them! The number of graduates you will eventually bring together at the Gatherings depends, obviously, on the number of graduates in your area, the time of the year and other factors. Certainly, given the amount of preparation involved in pulling the Gathering together, a minimum of 30 to 40 graduates would be desirable. For a very large areas where JustFaith parishes/groups are geographically spread, consider a “all graduate gathering” once a year and satellite meetings in other areas.



JustFaith Graduate Gatherings A Quick Planning Template

Who are some people that would be good to have on the organizing team?
(Graduate leaders should first ask the JustFaith diocesan staff contact to help identify some people for this team.)

What are some possible locations for the Gathering?

What are some possible dates for the Gathering?



What's going on in the community that we might want to feature?

What have JustFaith Graduates being doing that we might want to feature?

Who would make a good featured speaker?

Name	Topic
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<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>

Which agencies should be invited to make a presentation?

Agency	Contact Name
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>



What agencies should be invited to table at the Gathering?

Agency	Contact Name
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Who would be good at composing and/or leading prayer?

What sorts of opportunities do we want to provide for the Graduates to renew friendships, make new contacts and network?



What might an agenda look like?

Time	Activity
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Planning Next Steps – Working groups

	Date	Step	Person Responsible
1.	_____	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____	_____
5.	_____	_____	_____
6.	_____	_____	_____
7.	_____	_____	_____
8.	_____	_____	_____
9.	_____	_____	_____
10.	_____	_____	_____

