

College Justice WALKING | Just-FAITH

A Discipleship Journey with College Students

MEETINGS AT THE MARGINS

Guidelines for College JusticeWalking at the Social Service Agency

2011-2012

This manual is intended for individuals planning on coordinating a College JusticeWalking group. Please read this document in its entirety and refer questions or clarifications to the JustFaith Ministries Office. All materials are copyrighted and JustFaith Ministries is trademarked.

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Meetings at the Margins

2011-2012

Overview

Master, to whom shall we go? John 6:68

You are about to embark upon a pilgrimage, a literal and figurative spiritual journey. Like all true pilgrimages, the College J-Walking experience is a journey in two directions: moving out to engage the world that surrounds us, and going within to mine the depth of our experiences, listening to the indwelling Spirit who charges and changes hearts and minds. Throughout the process, you will be challenging and inspiring one another to deepen and broaden your circle of compassionate care.

As CJW coordinators, you are responsible for discerning, contacting, and selecting a local organization that will host your J-Walking group for every other session, the *Meeting at the Margins*. Engaging with marginalized persons reflects two vital dimensions of J-Walking. First, J-Walking is about people. J-Walkers are invited to dialogue and build relationships with persons whose lived experience is shaped at least in part by the marginalization they experience. Second, J-Walking is about margins, boundaries, or more exactly, about widening or stretching the circle of awareness and social connection that J-Walkers place around their lives.

Walking Humbly on Holy Ground

...and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8

Call to mind an experience when you were outside your comfort zone, or a situation in which you found yourself in unfamiliar territory. What happened? How did you feel? What did you do? Who did you meet? What did you learn?

Even for the most self-assured among us, being out of our element in uncomfortable or unfamiliar situations, with people who are unknown and somehow “different,” is something that we naturally tend to avoid. The feeling that we are out of place, not sure what to do or how to act can be very humbling. This sense of vulnerability we experience when we choose to cross boundaries of class, culture, race, or even familiarity, is a signal that we are crossing into other people’s lives and inviting them to cross into ours. Like Moses before the burning bush, we realize we are standing on holy ground. It is necessary at such times and in such places to proceed with caution, to symbolically take off our shoes. This kind of unsettling awkwardness indicates that we are crossing a threshold, moving away from our normal frame of reference and out to our margins, the edges where new relationships, fresh perspectives, and transformation await us. It is precisely at such times and on such shaky ground that we can become available



and open to the transforming presence of God's Spirit, working on us, reaching into our hearts to rearrange our lives.

“Outreach” and “Inreach” Experiences

Jesus led his followers out of their familiar environments and into relationships with people from all walks of life, especially with those considered social outcasts. Together Jesus and his disciples visited, ate with, and befriended people marginalized by society. While they reached out to the people in the towns and villages of Palestine, they were conversely touched by those whom they allowed to reach into their lives. It was through expressions of solidarity like visiting, socializing, sharing food and stories, teaching and healing, that the disciples were exposed to God's Reign breaking their lives open. Building relationships that foster this solidarity (or belonging) and that challenge the existence of socially-constructed boundaries is the hope and intention of Meetings at the Margins.

Widening the Margins of Possibility

Alternating College J-Walking session take place at a social service agency located outside the familiar area of the J-Walking group. Finding an agency willing to develop an ongoing relationship with your group is a vital to J-Walking. This community will set the parameters or the margins of your J-Walking journey, and the regular visits will provide the human faces, stories, and relationships that frame the J-Walking experience.

The tasks of selecting and contacting this site need to be accomplished by the JW coordinators BEFORE scheduling the J-Walking calendar.

Building friendships with the staff and individuals at the agency is so important to the integrity of the J-Walking process that every other two-hour session actually takes place on site, at this service agency. The first hour is dedicated to visiting people, in the hope of developing relationships. The remaining hour of this session takes place in a room at or near the agency, and it follows the reflection-dialogue pattern of the other J-Walking sessions. Building this ongoing relationship provides the context that “grounds” Gospel Justice, so that it remains a tangible, challenging, human, and personal part of J-Walkers' lives.

Unfortunately, because there are so many situations in which our neighbors have been pushed to the edges, there are many locations for such visits. Most large towns and cities have municipal agencies or religious missions that offer direct assistance to people. Organizations like the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Salvation Army, and Volunteers of America have a long legacy of responding to the gospel mandate to “love mercy.”

As a result of the growing recognition of the value of service-learning in our schools, and the commitment to outreach among our church ministries, these high-profile organizations are often frequented by large numbers of church and school groups. In some cases volunteer coordinators at these agencies find themselves overwhelmed.

Therefore, in addition to the more obvious agencies, you might think about other lesser-known organizations in your area. Widening your search and keeping your heart open to the creative impulses of the Spirit can also generate new avenues for life-giving connections. You may find yourself compelled to build a bridge that would connect J-Walkers to a group of people who are largely overlooked in your community.

As you widen the scope of your search, consider some of these places and people:

- Migrant worker or refugee ministries
- After-school tutorial programs for low-income families
- Daycare centers for elderly, disabled or homebound people
- Residential programs for people who are mentally challenged or disabled
- L'Arche or Catholic Worker communities
- The Urban League
- Women's shelters
- Veteran's Administration hospitals
- County- or State-supported nursing homes or adult daycare centers
- Juvenile detention centers or rehabilitation programs
- Community centers (such as YMCA)
- Youth or children's programs for low-income communities
- Group homes for people in recovery or living with HIV
- Justice ministries run by marginalized persons
- Outreach ministries supported by churches or religious communities

The goal of J-Walking is solidarity, building relationships that widen our experience of belonging. Solidarity requires the time dedicated to listening, visiting, sharing and directly connecting with people's lives. This emphasis can present challenges to agency staff more accustomed to assigning tasks or apprehensive about exposing the people they serve to visiting groups. It is important to make personal connections with agencies to introduce the J-Walking vision and clarify some ways that your group can meet the needs of the organization. (*See Attachment 1 for a sample letter of introduction.*)

Practical Considerations

Keep the following in mind when seeking out a social service agency:

- Identify places that are central and reachable for the group.
- Be attentive to the travel time involved and the potential for using public transport.
- The first hour (the relational experience) involves participating in tasks that meet the needs of the agency, while also allowing J-Walkers the opportunity

to build relationships with people at the agency. These tasks should be set up in advance.

- Look for agencies with available space in which J-Walkers can gather for dialogue and reflection after the first hour of interaction.
- If the agency has no available space, request the use of a room in a parish or school in the surrounding neighborhood.
- If your area offers an array of outreach ministries, seek out the situations of greatest need—the overlooked ministries.
- Consider the size of your group relative to the space and capacity of the agency (twelve people can easily overwhelm a small outreach center).
- Arrange to meet with a staff person at the agency.
- Be patient and flexible. Building meaningful relationships takes time.

The ideal location for *Meetings at the Margins* is an agency that allows J-Walkers the opportunity to spend an hour of quality time in the company of the people there. Initially there might be tasks to fulfill such as serving meals, cleaning, or tutoring. Such activities can foster relationships when they are done in conjunction with others. These tasks should not become the focus of your presence at the agency. While important, the tasks are really the context that allows relationships and solidarity to grow.

College J-Walking groups located in wealthier areas may feel led to make this a regular visit to underserved areas. Those based in more remote or rural areas, where social services are widely dispersed, may need to travel to a nearby town where they can connect with agencies that serve the needs of people across the county.

Discerning God's Call

Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?... 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Matthew 25: 37-40

After developing a list of potential organizations, begin to name the kinds of people with whom your group might be called to form relationships. Be attentive to the value of crossing boundaries, and the challenge of moving into areas that are unfamiliar to encounter people who are on the margins of your social circle. This process should involve prayerful discernment, inviting direction and guidance from the Holy Spirit. Use the following steps to guide you through the discernment process: (*You will need a candle and a Bible.*)

1. Create a list of local service agencies. You may need to contact your local Catholic Charities office or diocesan office of Justice and Peace for guidance.
2. Indicate or add to the list the names of groups of people that seem farthest from your community's circle of care (for example: inner city youth or

- children, homebound elders, mentally challenged adults, migrant worker families, refugees, and people who suffer from mental illness).
3. Light a candle and read Matthew 25: 31-46.
 4. Prayerfully read through your list, naming each agency and the people served at each location. As an agency or group is named, quietly pray the refrain: *“Lord to whom shall we go?”*
 5. Spend a few moments together in silence.
 6. Each J-Walking coordinator names the place/s and group/s to which s/he feels particularly drawn.
 7. Keeping in mind the recommendations in this document, discuss the practical considerations (safety, time and travel) and identify those places and people that seem most accessible to your group.
 8. Select at least two different potential sites that you feel called to investigate.
 9. Divide up the tasks of making personal contact with the agencies or groups you have chosen.
 10. Commit to a three-step process for making the connection:
 - Call to schedule a visit
 - Send a follow-up letter
 - Make a site visit
 11. Select a date to share feedback on their experience at the sites. (*At this meeting select one agency with whom your group will commit to four sessions at the margins*)
 12. Close this (*and the follow-up*) meeting by reading Isaiah 58:6-8, blessing the ministries, and the people served by the organizations you have visited.

Connecting with a Social Service Agency

Review the talking points outlined in Attachment 2 before contacting a social service agency. When you call to make the initial contact, listen for opportunities that might allow J-Walkers to make connections with people. Be aware that your presence at the agency may not be welcomed or needed. You may also discover that the one-hour limit might be too brief for the tasks that are suggested. Keep in mind that from the agency’s perspective, the tasks or activities your group can accomplish might take precedence. Flexibility and creativity in talking out interactive possibilities will be invaluable.

Some organizations require medical screening precautions (such as TB testing) before you can interact with people at the site. Others may require a signed release or permission form to protect the organization. It is important to be cooperative and willing to connect with the agency’s mission.

Request an orientation by a member of the agency’s staff during the first *Meeting at the Margins*. This will provide insights, background, and a deeper sense of the social realities faced by the people you will meet.

Creative Approaches

The four visits at the margins provide an opportunity to frame College J-Walking as a pilgrimage that leads J-Walkers out of their familiar world and into the lives of others. It may be challenging at first to find activities that will serve the agency while also allowing for personal interactions. This can be especially difficult when you are limited to tasks like folding newsletters, weeding flowerbeds, or picking up trash. These are not unimportant jobs and J-Walkers are encouraged to perform them humbly. However, you can challenge J-Walkers to invent creative ways to transform their tasks into opportunities for interactive engagement.

If your group is given a task that does not allow you to interact with the people at the agency, ask for the opportunity to visit (or be introduced) either before or after the task has been done. As trust is built, J-Walkers may notice other needs and possibilities and suggest these to the staff. In time it may even be possible to invite others at the agency to share the tasks with you.

Some agencies have fixed roles for volunteers, such as serving meals or handing out sandwiches. Challenge J-Walkers to gradually move their presence beyond this job description. Simple adjustments such as making and giving out name tags, introducing one another, bringing snacks to share, and/or asking permission to eat or visit with people, have the potential to transform and even reverse these roles.

Relationships can be built around monthly bingo sessions, card games, watching videos, sharing snacks, or homework assistance. Gradually, as relationships deepen, activities become less important and other opportunities for “unlikely” relationships develop.

Naming and Knowing People

In the College J-Walking process, the *Meetings at the Margins* take place in the context of spirituality and solidarity. Before and after each visit the J-Walking group gathers in a circle outside the agency for a brief moment of quiet prayer. A co-facilitator leads the group in a short blessing, making a cross on the pavement with sidewalk chalk, reminding participants they are standing on holy ground.

These visits are not intended as field studies in poverty and J-Walkers are dissuaded from dwelling on the benefits of “making a difference” in the lives of others. Over the course of the process, your group will be challenged to find creative ways to move from task-focused encounters to working and walking with others. In this way, energy is directed toward building relationships that become friendships. The focus shifts away from what your group is “doing” at the agency to how these relationships are impacting J-Walkers lives.

CJW coordinators should be aware of their own assumptions about “poverty,” “marginalized people,” “service,” and “charity.” Volunteering and “making a difference”

in other people's lives is a worthy concept. There is, however, a hidden temptation to distance ourselves from the real people we encounter and our complicity in their marginalization. If "they" are seen as the recipients of our service and care, with little to offer "us," that sense of deepening relationship as a mutual process of belonging together is lost. Additionally, we all risk overlooking the necessary healing, liberation, and life-adjustment gifted to us when we enter such a relationship.

J-Walkers are not volunteers seeking opportunities to do good things for others. Rather they are pilgrims seeking Reign of God encounters and relationships that offer "liberating" perspectives on the world. The regular visits are not about the place nor should they be about the activity. In their fullest sense, the *Meetings at the Margins* should be about the names, faces and relationships that J-Walkers will carry with them throughout the month.

CJW coordinators introduce the agency to J-Walkers at the opening retreat, during a reflection that names the place and the people the group will connect with over the four visits. J-Walkers will spend some time reflecting on what it means to be "at the margins," and how this experience might stretch us.

These sessions at the margins are not intended to evoke feelings of sympathy or accomplishment. J-Walkers should not look for merits (or accumulate service hours) for the time they spend at the margins. Nor do they enter people's lives in order to feel good about themselves and feel bad for others. It is only when we risk becoming implicated in people's lives, in the vulnerability of human encounter, that the synthetic (yet powerful!) separations of race, class, economic condition, status, age, intelligence or ability can begin to be challenged and transformed.

To "encounter" people means to make people count. J-Walkers journal, reflect, and pray about the realities of marginalized people in their local area. As the sessions unfold, they write the names of the people they are coming to know on the prayer cloth. They are encouraged to name and pray for the people they are encountering at the margins, and wrestle with the question - *How do the ways in which we live our lives impact the people we meet at the margins?*

Timeframe and Scheduling

Each of the visits need to be set up according to the needs of the agency, at a time and for a purpose that assists the people there. It is never easy or convenient to put ourselves at the disposal of others. Arranging meaningful and engaging encounters can be difficult and, in a convenience-driven society, we must be wary of the temptation to settle for the easiest options. Ideally these visits should follow a fixed pattern, scheduled at a regular time and day of the week (for example the second Saturday of the month, 12:00PM – 2:00PM). Regularity helps J-Walkers remember and plan for this commitment as part of the rhythm of their lives, and it enables the people at the agency to prepare for visits.

It is very likely that the *Meetings at the Margins* sessions will need to be scheduled on weekends. This may conflict with other family, social or campus-related commitments. There is no easy resolution to scheduling conflicts, and no single response can address every eventuality. But these conflicts can be fertile opportunities for J-Walkers to evaluate their priorities and commitments. Working through scheduling conflicts challenges J-Walkers to enter into dialogue about their responsibilities and demonstrates how to compromise for the sake of the group. J-Walkers sign a covenant of faithfulness at the opening retreat and are expected to participate fully in all four visits. CJW coordinators should model the level of consistency and commitment that is expected of participants.

Safety and Liability

Coordinating the *Meetings at the Margins* will require planning and foresight. While it is necessary to challenge J-Walkers to move beyond their comfort zones, it is also important to use care and good judgment when discerning how and where your group might be able to go safely.

When making the initial visit to an agency, ask about the safety of the area, accessibility, public transport options, and parking, as well as permission slips and health precautions.

CJW coordinators are responsible for creating a liability form that identifies the agency and indicates the dates of the visit.

Summary

College JusticeWalking is a mobile experience that involves walking into unfamiliar places and other people's lives in pursuit of God's re-adjusting love and justice. Visiting, listening, encountering and befriending are the defining verbs for the four *Meetings at the Margins*. Meeting and building relationships with marginalized persons puts everyone in a vulnerable place. Vulnerability is essential to the transforming power of God's compassionate justice in our lives. When we are vulnerable, our secure world is exposed and we become reachable and teachable.

Placing J-Walkers physically with marginalized persons, and frequenting places where the sinfulness of social boundaries is experienced, are prerequisites to understanding and welcoming the re-socialization that brings us into reverent-relationship with our God and right-relationship with our neighbor. In this way, as relationships develop, we begin to recognize how we are all in need of personal and social restoration. Building trust and deepening relationships is the natural way to widen the hearts of J-Walkers, the staff, and the people involved at the agencies.

Planning and making space for encounters at the social service agency will be challenging and time-consuming. Avoid the temptation to seek convenient alternatives that reduce or even eliminate these visits.



This regular pilgrimage outside your comfort zone is an irreplaceable component of the J-Walking process that should not be compromised.

Finally, may your group be led by the Holy Spirit into places and lives that open your eyes to new ways of seeing God's world, open your hearts to new ways of loving God's people, and energize your J-Walking community with life-affirming relationships.



Attachment 1 Sample Letter of Introduction
Adapt this letter to send to the agency staff you have contacted.



(DATE)

Dear _____,

Thank you for your willingness to meet with me to discuss the possibility of my group of (*number*) people making a connection with your agency and the people in your care.

College JusticeWalking is an extended process for college students who, aware of the injustice in our world, are trying to understand what it means to live a just life, faithful to God's call and the social teachings of our (Catholic) faith. Developing caring relationships with people like those you serve, and deepening our awareness of the suffering and brokenness in our world, are important goals for our journey.

As I mentioned in our telephone conversation on (*day and date*), we are interested in sharing in your mission as you care for the (*name the people served at the site*). I am hopeful we can find ways to assist you in your work that would also allow us to make a connection with the people at (*name the agency*).

I look forward to visiting you on (*day and date of scheduled site visit*), so that we can discuss the possibility of meeting at your agency for four regular visits over the course of our process, starting some time in (*name the first month of J-Walking*). I also mentioned our hope of finding a place for our group to gather after each visit. Any assistance you can offer in helping us locate a nearby room, for an hour of sharing and reflection after our visit will be deeply appreciated.

If you have any questions please contact me at (*phone and/or email*) and I will see you (*date, place, and time of scheduled visit*).

May God bless you and your work,
(*Signature*)

(*Name-typed*)
J-Walking Coordinator

Attachment 2

Discussion Points

Use these points to guide your discussions with staff at the agency.

- Introduce yourself, describe your group, and outline the College J-Walking process.
- Ask the staff person to describe the agency's mission, and the people they work with.
- Make it clear that you are looking to make a regular commitment - four scheduled visits over the course of the process, spending about an hour each visit with the people they work with.
- Stress the importance of participating in the work and mission of the agency, and the value of building relationships with the people they work with.
- Mention some ideal opportunities for personal connections and interactions that include visiting and working with the people they work with.
- Many organizations do not have a religious focus, and deal with people of diverse religious affiliations. Be clear that your goals involve helping, visiting and building relationships, adding that you have no intention to preach or evangelize.
- Ask about the possible use of a room at the agency where your group can gather for the second hour of dialogue and reflection. If there are no rooms available at any of the sites you have selected, widen your search to include a nearby parish or school and request permission to utilize a neighboring facility.
- Discuss issues of safety, making clear that you are concerned about the privacy and safety of the people they work with, as well as the safety of your own group.
- Schedule a date and time for a face-to-face visit with the staff person responsible for organizing and orienting volunteers.