The Practice of Integrity for Nonviolence®
In Advocacy Meetings

INSIGHTS FROM FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY
Sr. Sheila Kinsey, OSF-FCJM, D.Min.

Purpose: This reflection paper shows, from a Franciscan perspective, how to consciously practice nonviolence as a facilitator in advocacy meetings.

The Franciscan heritage has strongly influenced the development of the ideas and practices of nonviolence. Francis was characterized and recognized as a peacemaker when he brought his message of peace to areas of deep conflict, hatred, injury, doubt, and despair because he responded with love, forgiveness, faith, and hope. Francis readily countered difficult situations from the deep well of his reflective spirit and from his integrity that was rooted in God.

There are numerous similarities between Francis’ day and our day. People grasp for power by engaging in war to protect their rights and property. It is known that poverty creates a chasm between the rich and the poor. Yet there is an awareness of people who are marginalized and stigmatized in society and that they are the ones Francis would reach out to today.

Francis knew the importance of personal contacts. While he honored places for prayer and reflection, he also related authentically with St. Clare and the brothers. The Franciscan friars were sent out to be in the midst of conflict to bring about social change by creating a more just society through peaceful means. St. Clare lived her life within a cloister and thus came to understand in deeper ways what it meant to establish a community within a particular context. For her, community was built through a shared vision and through specific actions day-to-day.

Francis and Clare were exceptionally creative and visionary in their ways of looking at everyday life. Walking in their footsteps, we approach the great challenges of our age. We bring their creative vision to our reality and to Earth, to the chaos around us,
to our reverence for life, and our struggle for justice and peace. Peacemaking is at the heart of facilitation in advocacy meetings. The practice of nonviolence strengthens the ability to actively address social justice concerns, support peace initiatives, and reverence all creation. All should consider themselves as citizens of the world, participants in a global society, and sharing in a universal responsibility for the common good of all.

Practice of Integrity for Nonviolence

Violence as a corrective to injustice can only have short-term results. Ultimately, violence breeds only more violence. Violence intimidates and can force people to act in unhealthy ways. There are the obvious ramifications of physical violence but, subtle and less noticeable, non-physical verbal violence may be equally destructive. Violence is at the heart of injustices.

Francis valued personal integrity. He used to tell them: "As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that you have greater peace in your hearts."3

Violence can take place within groups, even when the cause is just. Some people may strive for control of the meetings and clamor for turf rights. The truth can be shaded when trying to engage people to support a cause. Someone’s freedom of speech can be ignored. In the name of a just cause, people might not assume responsibility for negotiating fairly. Trust and support are assumed and expected, yet necessary information may not be provided. Personal agendas can become so overwhelming they can be destructive of the spirit of the group. With advocacy meetings and follow-up actions, a culture of nonviolence must be actively nurtured within the group while engaging in countering the violence of injustices, both at home and abroad.

The practice of nonviolence enables one to act from a sound personal basis and an effective organizational framework. Responding from integrity creates meaningful actions and effective results. Integrity requires setting aside reflection time for discernment, speaking from conviction, and determining how to act. Through this process, one gains a quiet sense of knowing what is theirs to do from a nonjudgmental compassionate stance.

Meetings and Advocacy

The Franciscan values of community and relatedness lead to addressing the area of social change and advocacy through group meetings. In the Gospel, Jesus spoke about the importance of meetings when he promised: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Matthew 18:20. Meetings provide a dynamic opportunity to attend to moments of grace. As advocates it is important to remember that it is the Holy Spirit who is the Advocate teaching us the way. John 16:7,8. Adhering to a schedule or routine defines space for a free flow of ideas so that depth of sharing happens. Providing a welcoming space is conducive to the sharing that takes place using the following format:

- introductions,
- prayer,
- sharing advocacy efforts and receiving ongoing support,
- new learnings,
- future directions and
- a sending forth with a sense of actions to do.

Celebrations of successes are important for the common good. True unity is possible in honoring the diversity of the group and in acknowledging member’s actions. The challenge is to go deep
into the issues to find common ground where questions are welcomed to clarify understanding, to develop meaning, and to challenge thinking. People are energized to act and are invited to share the fruits of their actions at the next meeting. The group becomes more cohesive and powerful as more participants collectively identify with the spirit and thrust for the common good in which all can have a significant part.

The experience of working with the oppressed led to the development of Integrity for Nonviolence ® (IFN), which is an integrative process that promotes the spiritual practice of nonviolence. In the role of a facilitator of advocacy meetings, a nonviolent stance can be demonstrated by these values: creating respect, practicing honesty, promoting justice and nurturing wholesome relationships. By consciously attending to these values, the creation of a culture of nonviolence can be facilitated. The way in which the group participants interact with one another will have a significant impact on what the network can do. These meetings will help in providing an avenue for the spiritual practice of nonviolence.

Creating Respect

To create respect, the dignity of each person must be honored and recognized by initiating simple courtesies. Network participants are welcomed into a carefully prepared and inviting meeting space. At the meeting each person is given an opportunity to share information. Value is given to each person’s right to speak, even if everyone is not in agreement with what is said. The overlying message is that the person speaking is important. When there are times for personal sharing, people are engaged to share, but only what is comfortable for them. Prying into delicate or sensitive areas is not encouraged. Good communication methods are developed for a common understanding with periodic check-ins with the group for needed clarifications. A safe and non-threatening place for the participants must be consciously established. Care should be given to see that helpful and productive ideas are given room to surface. People are to be supported in sharing their ideas without feeling intimidated or threatened. Opinions are received as thoughts to consider. Both before and after the meeting, and at other times, participants are available to talk with each other and especially with the meeting leaders. Knowing that the participants are in it for the long haul, they will become sensitive to the process that takes place within individuals and within the political system in which they are advocates for change.

Francis realized that body language and tone carried communications. By a joyful face he understood the fervor and solicitude, the disposition and readiness of a mind and body to willingly undertake every good work, because through this kind of fervor and disposition others are at times more motivated than through the good deed itself.⁴

Francis discerned his actions through the lens of compassion. For he spoke to them compassionately, not as a judge, but as a father to his children and a doctor to his patient.⁵

Applications: A receptive and nurturing meeting space enables participants to share what they have done. People readily ask for help with local projects and legislative issues. For example, High School Students made a quilt commemorating their thoughts and feelings about the AIDS pandemic in Africa, while they fasted and prayed. They presented the quilt at a DuPage Glocal Aids Action Network (DGAAN) meeting and the quilt has since traveled to many places to be displayed along with talks about AIDS. Other people have held fundraising events and sponsored educational opportunities. Communication has been strengthened by e-mails, cards, reminders and handouts.

A safe and non-threatening place for the participants must be consciously established. Care should be given to see that helpful and productive ideas are given room to surface. People are to be supported in sharing their ideas without feeling intimidated or threatened. Opinions are received as thoughts to consider. Both before and after the meeting, and at other times, participants are available to talk with each other and especially with the meeting leaders. Knowing that the participants are in it for the long haul, they will become sensitive to the process that takes place within individuals and within the political system in which they are advocates for change.
Practicing Honesty

In the practice of honesty, all should attend to open and truthful communication in various ways. Be watchful that only credible and accurate information is provided for all advocacy purposes. A strategic planning process should be based on reliable contributions from the participants. Realistic plans are clear and concrete. The vision becomes actualized in this planning process. Participants are affirmed and encouraged to do what they say that they will do.

Applications: It’s important to honestly consider the whole picture. It is necessary to determine realistic goals and stay on track. Set forth a plan and provide feedback about the progress. Having a vision allows our sights to stay focused and guards against pettiness. Such phrases that have captured the vision and energized groups are “If you want peace, work for justice”, “Build the Movement,” and “Keep the Promise.”

People need to freely assume meaningful activities to express their true self. They will become conscious that doing work that is significant for them is enjoyable and they will then strive to find ways for their work to be meaningful for others. Within the network, people are challenged to grow and to use their capabilities wherever possible. Personal values are practiced without being compromised by pressure to promote an issue that someone may not believe in. Participants are given opportunities to learn skills and gain expertise through educational and coaching sessions. People are encouraged to express what is true for them without demeaning others’ perspectives.

Applications: It’s helpful to provide opportunities for coaching and education though reading material and guest speakers. Go over requirements for meetings with elected officials. If several people are attending a meeting, determine each person’s role in the visit beforehand and practice what each person is going to say. It is also helpful to consider the opinions and feelings of the official and to anticipate questions they may have and to try to provide answers to their questions.
Promoting Justice

In the area of justice, opportunities to express accountability and responsibility energize the group. Goals are defined and measurable. Clear expectations about the purposes of meetings and advocacy efforts must be given. In a dependable way the meetings begin on time, with time allotted for informal networking, and always end on time. Ownership of the group grows as members realize that they are participating in creating the image of the network. Various people are included in news stories. Ongoing feedback is encouraged by an established format that has been embraced by the members. A person tells their name, their organization and their plans for actions and their results. The group is actively involved in developing a glocal community response that includes both local and global responses.

Applications: Provide opportunities for participants to share their actions and to solicit input from others. Wherever possible, capitalize on the work of local activists since they know what works for them. Encourage local involvement. Very few people will be able to travel to other countries, but they can connect with local, national, and international advocates and take advantage of their ongoing activities through use of internet platforms.

Francis negotiates a fair agreement with the violent wolf and the citizens of Gubbio: This scene has implications for personal hunger that each participant in the group has for social issues. If these hungers are not dealt with appropriately, then they can dominate and be destructive of the group and the person. “Brother Wolf, since you want to make this pact, I promise you that as long as you live I will have your needs constantly provided for by the people of this city, so that you will never again suffer hunger, because I know that, whatever evil you do, you do because of the frenzy of hunger. But, my Brother Wolf, for me to obtain this favor for you, I want you to promise me that you will never harm any animal or person or dare to harm anything. Will you promise me that?” The wolf gave a clear sign by bowing its head that it promised to do what the saint demanded.

Group organizers should look for ways to negotiate in fairness for equitable solutions. When conflicts arise, the problems are discussed in a way that considers the needs and expected

Francis practices specific social actions as a result of his faith.

*If you bestow your bread on the hungry, then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your justice will go before your face.*

If you bestow your bread on the hungry, then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your justice will go before your face.
outcomes of all in both the local and global concern. For example, money already allocated for social issues should not be taken away from existing local or global programs to fund the newer initiatives. In the spirit of cooperation, problems are resolved on the most effective level possible. Sometimes that involves extra one-on-one interactions to discuss matters privately. Using nonviolent communication skills, situations are resolved without blaming or criticizing on the personal level. Individual rights are safeguarded in a way that promotes a fair and productive network. Conflicts are dealt with in a timely and workable manner.

Applications: Consciously advocate for legislation for the glocal concerns that stipulate that global funding for social issues does not take away from local programs or other global programs. Local needs do not have to be sacrificed for global concerns. It is important to stay with the struggle to attend to local concerns even as we attend to global issues.

Nurturing Wholesome Relationships

In the area of nurturing wholesome relationships, strive to provide adequate resources. The necessary equipment, materials and services need to be available to accomplish the work of the network. The group needs to look for creative ways to address new situations. Endeavor to better advocacy efforts, to strengthen connections and to utilize a consistent process for the initiation, follow-through and follow-up for the work to be done. Participants know that they operate as a team in the network. All participants are encouraged to use their abilities for the good of others and for themselves.

Applications: Endeavor to see that all information is adequate, accurate and timely. With the establishment of clear activities to realize goals, participants have distinct opportunities to become involved. Know the process of the legislation. Brainstorm for what is needed and ask for what is necessary from other organizations. Stay with the plan and educate as needed.

Francis knew the importance of a positive attitude in creating trust and support. In fact, if an act, however good it might be, does not seem to be done willingly and fervently, it brings forth tedium rather than motivating good.11

Francs and the early friars consciously attended to the needs of one another. They loved one another from the heart and each one served and took care of the other.10

Strive to find ways that demonstrate trust and support. The success of each person is acknowledged. The values of diverse cultures are recognized and appreciated. Persons are able to share their expertise and skills in ways that matter to them and to the network. In developing the network, persons are able to address their own needs in addition to the needs of the network. To sustain the general welfare of the group, strive to make information available to the membership in a timely manner, and encourage each person to do their part to keep informed about the issues.

Applications: Seek out ways for all to be considered team players in the group’s actions, such as making calls, sending e-mails, writing letters and making legislative visits. Everyone counts, and no one should be left out. There is ownership for the whole group and any success is applauded. Opportunities for press and media coverage are shared. Although individual concerns are raised and honored as much as possible, participants are engaged in promoting the shared goals and common good of the network.
Conclusion

The image of Integrity for Nonviolence® is a compass. A compass provides the right direction when it is firmly oriented to its true North, which represents true ethical sensibility. An inner compass helps reflect on the directions and helps to discern what causes need to be considered. The four values of INV process are directional points: creating respect, practicing honesty, promoting justice and nurturing wholesome relationships.

The conscious practice of nonviolence through integrity is preparation to be open to the movement of the Spirit wherever the opportunity arises to confront the devastating effects of poverty. Such a process provides balance - centering in prayer and discernment while also moving to engage others in the long-term work of justice and peace.

Encourage all to come to social justice actions with a contemplative spirit that nourishes social justice actions. By attending to compassionate responses, they will develop a discerning heart to know what is theirs to do.

Bibliography

1. The Legend of the Three Companions as found in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents p. 84. The words we use create the framework for our actions. Words express what is important for us. In many ways the current word use of nonviolence strives to capture Francis’s understanding of harmony and struggle that he associated with the word peace.

2. The Legend of the Three Companions as found in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents p. 74. The kissing of the leper was a conversion experience for Frances, an event that he frequently reflected upon. This process enabled him to deeply understand the significance of his time.

3. The Beginning or Founding of the Order and the Deeds of Those Lesser Brothers Who Were the First Companions of Blessed Francis in Religion by Anonymous of Perugia as found in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents
p. 52. It’s always important to check periodically to see if we are sharing a message that we authentically embrace and are committed to developing within ourselves.

4. **A Mirror of Perfection The Sabatier Edition as found in Francis of Assisi the Prophet Volume III of: Francis of Assisi: Early Documents p. 343.** A courteous and respectful manner does much to develop a welcoming and receptive environment.

5. **The Beginning or Founding of the Order and the Deeds of Those Lesser Brothers Who Were the First Companions of Blessed Francis in Religion by Anonymous of Perugia as found in Francis of Assisi the Founder Volume II of: Francis of Assisi: Early Documents p. 53.** When we find ourselves involved in controversial issues, we need to be guided by our personal spirit of compassion and remain nonjudgmental.

6. **The Life of St. Francis by Thomas Celano The First Book as found in Francis of Assisi the Saint Volume I of: Francis of Assisi: Early Documents p. 245.** Constant efforts to strive for the truth will enable us to speak an authentic and clear message.

7. **The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul by Thomas of Celano The Second Book as found in Francis of Assisi the Founder Volume II of Francis of Assisi: Early Documents p. 386.** It is important to assume the responsibility to determine what is ours to do during our lifetime. God is there to help us do this.

8. **The Beginning or Founding of the Order and the Deeds of Those Lesser Brothers Who Were the First Companions of Blessed Francis in Religion by Anonymous of Perugia as found in Francis of Assisi the Founder Volume II of: Francis of Assisi: Early Documents p. 35.** Our faith needs to have good works in order for us to be faith-filled. We are involved in the needs for our times.

9. **The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions by Ugolino Boniscambi of Montegiorgi as found in Francis of Assisi the Prophet Volume III of: Francis of Assisi: Early Documents p 483 Story pp 482-485.** A similar story is also found in The Little Flowers of Saint Francis pp 601-603 in the same volume. Being involved with injustices can raise up personal issues that have been unconscious for a number of years, which if left unattended, can be acted out in a group. Also, being in the midst of injustices can be destructive if a person is not fortified by a clear way of acting.

10. **The Beginning or Founding of the Order and the Deeds of Those Lesser Brothers Who Were the First Companions of Blessed Francis in Religion by Anonymous of Perugia as found in Francis of Assisi the Founder Volume II of: Francis of Assisi: Early Documents p. 46.** Mutuality creates wholesome relationships.

11. **A Mirror of Perfection, the Sabatier Edition, pg 343.** Willing and committed people nourish the trust and support necessary for the team to function in a healthy manner.

Sr. Sheila Kinsey, OSF-FCJM, D.Min., is a Wheaton Franciscan. She has been a teacher, principal and diocesan director of religious education. Sr. Sheila has been involved with counseling and managing domestic violence and sexual abuse programs and has provided assistance to church groups and civic organizations on these issues. She has pioneered the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) Office and promotes legislative advocacy on social justice issues on behalf of the province.

Sr. Sheila has direct experience with peacemaking efforts in corporate culture and ministry settings and can speak to the practice of nonviolence in personal and communal contexts. She has developed Integrity for Nonviolence®, a value centered process dedicated to the promotion of nonviolence by providing strategies and interventions for social change within the workplace and community settings.

Originally published 2006