



Social Justice and Common Ground: An Interview with June Cooper



Is your congregation looking for ways to address social and economic justice issues? Tap into the infectious enthusiasm that June Cooper, Executive Director of City Mission Society, recently shared with the Congregational Resource Guide. June emphasizes the importance of prophetic voices on behalf of the poor and outcast, explores ways that congregations can work together, and reminds us to provide ways for people to be open to the Holy Spirit.

• Overview

The City Mission Society (CMS) of Boston, begun by the Congregational Church, will celebrate its 190th anniversary in 2006 as it continues a long tradition of doing charitable and social justice work in the Boston area. June Cooper, an ordained Baptist minister, has been its Executive Director for almost four years.

Faith-based programs of the CMS include the following:

- **The Public Voice Project:** advocates for criminal system reforms; develops leadership skills for ex-offenders; forms partnerships for social change.
- **Common Ground:** fosters relationships to develop a larger sense of community and expand congregations' understanding of social issues.
- **Crisis Intervention:** provides assistance and stability to people in financial crisis, particularly people facing unexpected set-backs or chronic poverty.
- **Youth Arts:** connects artists and poets with hundreds of high-risk area school children to help children develop self-esteem and discover the joys of artistic creativity.

• About June Cooper

June Cooper's call to ministry is very much about using the Gospel's message for the transformation of society, for realizing the Kingdom here on earth. June and CMS reach out to a wide gathering of diverse communities for systemic change and justice. She recalled being moved years ago by a sermon preached on John 21: 1-14—the post-Resurrection scene where Jesus appears on the beach by the Sea of Galilee and calls for the disciples to join him for a meal around the fire. He calls them, once

again, to leave their familiar lives as fishermen and encounter abundant life by reaching out beyond what was safe and known.

- **Interview**

Congregational Resource Guide staff interviewed June Cooper early in 2006. Here are our questions and her responses:

CRG: What is most important about your ministry and the City Mission Society?

June: City Mission needs to always be a platform for being a prophetic voice in the city. Being a prophetic voice in the public square can be a very hard, bruising, and challenging ministry—but one so needed.

CRG: How do you envision your work relating to congregational life and individual parishes?

June: Living out the Christian faith is not just about having an individual, vertical, up and down relationship with God. The Hebrew Testament prophets—and later Jesus of the Gospels—show us how horizontal relationships with our neighbors, especially those in need, are just as important.

We at City Mission Society (CMS) provide a social justice witness for a lot of congregations—many of them affluent, suburban churches very insulated from the oppression suffered by the poor and others not of society's mainstream. We provide structured, faith-based ways for church members to live out the Gospel message—opportunities for them to step out of their comfortable, known world and dare to meet others who are different from themselves. We offer the chance for people to take a risk. That can sometimes result in unexpected grace. That is a powerful spiritual experience!

CRG: Give us a specific example of the kind of "structured opportunity" you're talking about for a congregation.

June: Our Common Ground project is a good example. As a faith-based social justice organization, CMS facilitates the collaboration of two quite different congregations. Typically, we connect a suburban church (usually white and middle class) with a church in the heart of the urban center (usually a church with many people of color). Each place presents a different cultural ethos. The people in both churches have many life experiences that are different from one another.

We bring them together for a short weekend "pilgrimage" in the city of Boston—Common Ground—to spend one day or one and a half days doing a service project together, sharing a meal, worshipping together, and sharing life experiences. It is an eye-opener for the people in both churches!

Common Ground is one of our new programs, so we are starting small. Earlier this fall we had a small group of people from two Baptist churches

in the suburbs come into the city for a one-day "pilgrimage." Together with members of St. Mark's Congregational Church in Dorchester (an urban church), we did several things together. Before ending the day with worship at St. Mark's, we visited the historic African Meeting House on Beacon Hill and we helped serve a meal at the Pine Street Inn—one of Boston's largest homeless shelters. Everyone learned something new that day! And people experienced first hand a glimpse of what we Christians mean by doing "justice work."

As Marcus Borg (one of my favorite theologians) says, we Christians don't talk much about the practice of Christianity. That day on our pilgrimage we showed people what "practicing Christianity" could mean. And the church members were energized and inspired to go back to their own congregations to continue this work.

CRG: Any advice for congregational leaders—lay or ordained—on doing social justice work or organizing people to participate in mission and social justice?

June: To be truly faithful to the idea of providing a "prophetic voice"—someone who speaks against the status quo and for the outcast—is very hard and challenging. Be careful—you could lose your job! Nonetheless, someone has to be the champion, the leader, within the congregation. But lead by example. If you advocate that your church members should go out and feed the hungry, you should go out first and lead by example.

You can never stop teaching and informing your congregation. Help them understand the issues of their world, community, and neighborhood, and then show them how their faith provides the Spirit needed to address those issues. For example, at First Baptist Church of Framingham, I've done a workshop on God's justice—which is quite different from our society's understanding of justice. God's justice doesn't always seem fair to us. There are elements of mercy in God's justice that we can find hard to accept.

As in all other areas of ministry, even after all your hard work and organizing, nothing will happen until the Spirit moves. We have to always help provide the means for people to be open to the Spirit.

People leading the charge need to be fed in order to sustain them for the long run and to avoid burnout. One of my favorite books is Joan Chittister's *The Rule of Benedict*—a powerful, meditative resource.

Additional resources June Cooper recommends to congregational leaders:

Studying Congregations: A New Handbook Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, William McKinney, Editors. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998.

Pastors need to know how to change and churches need to be able to relate to their surrounding communities. Churches need to be integral to their communities.

Rest in the Storm: Self-Care Strategies for Clergy and Other Caregivers Kirk Byron Jones, Author. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000.

Kirk Byron Jones is an African American ordained Baptist minister and ethicist at Andover Newton Theological Seminary. This book is about self-care strategies for pastors.

Addicted to Hurry: Spiritual Strategies for Slowing Down Kirk Byron Jones, Author. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003.

Kirk Byron Jones presents a spiritual strategy for slowing down. Both lay and ordained ministers will find the author's insights and advice helpful.

This interview is part of the "Wise Voices" effort, which gathers thoughts and essays from people who know congregations. These are leaders with know-how—through first-hand knowledge, academic study, or practical experience. If you are or know of a "Wise Voice" we should include, please contact us at info@crg.org.

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