In the religious education program, teaching compassion and justice can begin in the classroom but gradually opens to wider realms as the learners awaken to their wider world. Moving beyond the church begins first in our personal and family life, then moves to churchwide reflection and action. As we wake to the wider world and its problems and needs, these become the starting point of our Christian evangelization. Our response to these needs moves in two directions—compassion and justice.

Compassion focuses on aiding the victims of social evil. We marshal our efforts to provide more immediate assistance to those who are poor, hungry, in need food and shelter, clothes and toys. Acting with compassion means performing the charitable actions that our Christian tradition calls the corporal works of mercy.

Justice focuses on changing the structures of society to conform more closely with Jesus’ vision of rightly ordered relationships. Working for justice begins in the heart, but social justice takes the efforts of communities of reflection and action banding together to use their power effectively for social transformation.

Since the institutions of society are so complex, the structural evil embedded in them is also complex. Consequently, working for social justice almost always involves joining with others in an organization to change the societal structures that conceal social sin.

Jesus sent us to continue his works of compassion and justice. The church that takes this challenge seriously delves into scriptural teachings that cast light on social issues, including poverty, refugees and immigrants, human rights violations, unionization, farm labor, defense policy, military expenditures, housing, health care, problems of the handicapped, child abuse, gun control, inadequacies in the justice and prison systems, political and government corruption, education, media and especially the tendencies toward violence and greed that permeate our consumer culture.

Teaching for compassion and justice is a component of every session. Every week, the scripture passages from the lectionary serve as natural springboards to applications in our lives. But there are also more formal methods to involve your participants in the work of compassion and justice. A simple but effective method can be summarized by the motto “Aware, Care, Share.”

Aware
Awareness is the first step. We must notice the problem in order to fix it. As we wake up to the wider world, we become aware of people and problems that we never noticed before. Change and evangelization begin with a new vision, often really “seeing” for the first time, the plight of the poor, the homeless, the sick and handicapped, and victims of all kinds.

Christian compassion begins with a sense of solidarity with the poor and oppressed because of our basic Christian commitment to the dignity of each person as a child of God. As a teacher, your role is to nudge learners into new awareness and foster new attitudes of compassion with those who suffer. Often guest speakers or field trips into the wider world that focus on the plight of those who suffer are the best first step to increasing awareness.

**Care**

The second step encourages moving from awareness to a response of compassion. What can we do to alleviate or help these people who are suffering? Our care is translated into more immediate, practical action. Here a good guideline is to involve your teachers and learners in projects that are close to home, with concrete goals that allow a sense of having accomplished something, for example, making sandwiches or gathering winter gloves and hats for a homeless shelter. The time commitment is manageable, the project is doable and the feeling of accomplishment is real.

**Share**

The third step invites us to become involved with others beyond the church in organizations dedicated to long-range solutions to problems. Instead of concern with alleviating symptoms, we dedicate our time and effort to rooting out the causes of the diseases that plague our society.

Consider participating either as individual groups—or better as a whole church—in a longer-term project, either over the year or with the ongoing project of an organization. Many national organizations have ways to participate in your local area with action steps that need to be done.

Instilling the pattern of “Aware, Care, Share” provides learners with a tool for implementing the demands of compassion and justice as essential parts of our Christian vocation. However, as you explore possibilities of compassion and justice beyond your church, you will probably encounter church members who have other viewpoints or who might not agree about the direction your program is going. This is often an opportunity to involve the congregation in reflection about how we ought to apply the gospel to social issues and live
out our relationship to God and our neighbors round the globe.

Living the Good News is a lectionary-based curriculum from Morehouse Education Resources, a division of Church Publishing Incorporated. This article is part of the support material for teachers.