

# FEATURE

## *Theme Articles on Systemic Change*

### A Primer on the Purpose and Principles for Systemic Change

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#### **Introduction**

The concept of “Systemic Change” as a strategy both for evangelization and in service of the poor has been on the horizon of the Congregation of the Mission and of the worldwide Vincentian Family for a number of years. Through articles, discussions, a commission created by the Superior General, special projects, and dialogue between Conferences of Visitors and among confreres, the quest to understand and integrate Systemic Change as a way to live the Vincentian charism has been ongoing. These multiple efforts culminated in its adaptation by the 2010 General Assembly “Lines of Action” as part of the plan to guide the Congregation through 2016.

This contents of this article are taken from “*Seeds of Hope: Stories of Systemic Change*”, a book authored by members of the Commission for Systemic Change. To provide the reader with the main tenets of Systemic Change, this article is intended as a “primer”, a resource to assist in attaining an overview of this direction undertaken by the 2010 General Assembly.

Below are listed ten strategies essential to understanding Systemic Change, each with a brief explanation. These strategies are then followed by statements from members authoritative sources within of the Vincentian Family which affirm Systemic Change as a viable way of living out the Vincentian charism. The statements are “official”, as they are taken from constitutions, rules, and resolutions of organizational meetings. As one sees, they call for Systemic Change.

## Ten Strategies for Systemic Change

### Strategy 1:

***Consider poverty not merely as the inevitable result of circumstances, but also as the product of unjust situations that can be changed, and focus on actions that will break the cycle of poverty.***

It is essential that individuals and groups work together for change. Poverty can be eradicated only by building just social structures in which the poor have equal access to education, employment, housing, health care, and other basic human needs. In a 2005 address to “Make Poverty History”, Nelson Mandela said: “Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is a human creation and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity – it is an act of justice”.

Fredrick Ozanam, the principal founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, made precisely the same point 150 years earlier: “Charity is not sufficient. It treats the wounds but does not stop the blows that cause them.... Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveler who has been attacked. It is Justice’s role to prevent the attacks”.

### Strategy 2:

***Design projects, creative strategies, policies and guidelines that flow from our Christian and Vincentian values and mission.***

This strategy is rooted in a clear assertion of St. Vincent, “I am for God and the poor”. It is a simple expression of his commitment to respecting the dignity of the person. Vincent believed that needs must be identified and prioritized, and people must be involved in planning and implementing solutions to those needs. They must “own” their project.

Under Vincent’s guidance, projects started out small, were carefully planned, and designed in a way to develop and last. Vincent knew effective planning required sufficient financial and human resources to insure that initiatives be self-sustainable. The fact that St. Vincent’s original foundations – AIC, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity – have lasted more than 380 years is evidence of the staying power that he built into these organizations.

### Strategy 3:

***Finding a community voice: a strategy for systemic change.***

This follows Vincent’s path. In Châtillon-les-Dombes, he wrote many documents about translating the gospel into organized action. Consistently he asked his followers to aim for concrete results: effective change.

In the ensuing centuries, members of the Vincentian Family have taken up the call and gather together and empower a community in need. The following story provides a wonderful contemporary example.

When less than one per cent of people own the land on which they farm, there is bound to be poverty and great misery. Dreadful living conditions cannot improve, due to very limited access to education and healthcare. Community itself falls apart, as people retreat into private misery. How can one change such a dismal situation?

The Daughters of Charity in the Philippines realized these and many problems had become entrenched for the poor of San José in Occidental Mindoro, Philippines. The “band-aid” approach would bring no lasting change. Their strategy: to analyze the local scene and develop programs to reflect the reality. Their strategy translated into uniting a community to speak with one voice and work together to transform those working and living conditions.

#### **Strategy 4:**

***Have a holistic vision to address basic human needs – individual, social, spiritual, physical, jobs, health care, housing, and education with an integral approach toward prevention and sustainable development.***

Poverty is a complex reality, operating at multiple levels. At its core, poverty always has a human face. Any strategy for systemic change should include people-driven initiatives to address identified needs and aspirations, willing support groups from their sector, and resources to assist from private, public, technical, and legal spheres. All these form the basis to promote a holistic vision as a strategy for systemic change. Such holistic vision captures the four groupings of the strategies of the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change of the Vincentian Family:

- *Mission-oriented strategies (to provide motivation and direction);*
- *Task-oriented strategies (to encourage organization);*
- *People-oriented strategies (focus on the poor as capable of changing their situation);*
- *Strategies on co-responsibility, networking and political action (to promote ongoing participation and solidarity).*

#### **Strategy 5:**

***Implement coherent strategies, start modestly, delegate tasks and responsibilities, and provide quality services respectful of human dignity.***

Practical, concrete and effective services are the hallmark of the Vincentian charism, faithful to our core conviction that each person is

made in the image and likeness of God. This reality calls us to meet both the corporal and spiritual needs, in ways well thought out that achieve lasting results. In St. Vincent's work, one sees the outlines of systemic change:

- Defining a local, specific need;
- Responding in a practical, immediate, and modest way;
- Building awareness of the problem and the solution;
- Enlisting and empowering an organized, multi-faceted response.

### **Strategy 6:**

***Listen carefully to understand the needs and aspirations of the poor to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and to foster self-esteem. Involve the poor at all stages: need identification, planning, implementation, evaluation and revision.***

The personal and communal involvement of the poor in all stages is a key element of systemic change. This requires collaboration in the process by both those living in poverty and those seeking to assist them. Those seeking to help the poor must be willing to enter into dialogue and take on the same risks with the poor. This demands willingness on the part of all involved to roll up their sleeves, immerse themselves, and learn with the poor, moving away from their comfort zones. Such a shift reflects a move from mere delivery of a service or fulfilling a specific need into a dynamic process of interaction and interpersonal growth.

Sts. Vincent and Louise, and later Bl. Frederick Ozanam wanted service to be carried out with competence, skill, and adequate resources. The service offered must provide a foundation of gentleness, respect and attention to those in need. In reflecting on the impact of the life and works of Frederick Ozanam, Fr. Robert Maloney, in his book *Faces of Holiness*, envisions what the founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul might say to us today:

*"What does this face of Ozanam say to us? It says, 'Do not be afraid of new beginnings. Be creative. Be inventive. Organize new works of love in the service of the poor. You who have energy; who have enthusiasm; who want to do something of value for the future; be inventive, launch out; do not wait'."*

### **Strategy 7:**

***Make the project self-sustaining by insuring it will have the human and economic resources needed to last. Be transparent; seek participation in budget preparation, feedback on financial reports, and careful control over money management.***

Whether a project begins and just as importantly, survives depends on its having permanent human and economic resources. That is a challenging aspect of working for systemic change. But it can be done. The systemic change is sustainable when the critical human and economic resources are in place. This strategy depends on a holistic vision, making a compelling case for the project, gaining the commitment of a core group, and developing a plan to show the project is realizable and sustainable. It depends on both a demonstration of a clear need and the right resources and timing to obtain funding. When these are in place, a project can attract initial seed money to begin.

But the human and financial costs of bringing a project to completion and sustenance must also be part of the calculus of planning. If not, it may end up in that graveyard of great projects that started out well but were never completed. Jesus' parable in Luke's Gospel tells us as much when it cautions: if you want to build a tower, will you not first calculate the outlay for fear of starting the work and not being able to complete it? (*Luke 14:28*).

Flowing from good initial planning is the need for financial transparency. Both in planning and implementing a budget, it is absolutely necessary to have skilled assistance at all phases of the project. For St. Vincent, transparency was equivalent to simplicity. Transparency instills a spirit of trust, ownership and accountability. Ways of fostering transparency include having open meetings, offering complete financial disclosure, and making audits and reports available to all.

### **Strategy 8:**

***Systematize, institutionalize and evaluate the project and its procedures, describing measurable indicators and results.***

In this strategy, three verbs are important: *systematize, institutionalize, and evaluate*.

First, *systematize*. Focus not just on the individual aspects of the problem, but on the system as a whole. See how the "pieces of life" fit together into an operative system. For example: having a job produces wages. Wages enable the purchase of food and decent housing. Good nourishment and sanitary living conditions foster health. Education assists in getting a job that produces wages. One of the keys to systemic change is to discern where to attempt to break into the cycle of poverty, so that the project will treat not just one problem, providing a short-term solution, but will confront various problems step by step.

Second, *institutionalize*. Like buildings, projects last only if they are well-structured. For a project to be sustainable it must be "institutionalized"; structures must be created for planning, governing, financing, modifying and continuing the project as time goes on.

Third, *evaluate*. Evaluation is an indispensable follow-up to action. A periodic review of a project provides the opportunity to assess its positive and negative aspects and, as problems arise or circumstances change, to adjust its goals, methods and means.

### **Strategy 9:**

***Educate, train and offer spiritual formation to all participants in the project.***

Systemic Change must be built on firm foundations of commonly held knowledge, values and beliefs for it to be truly transformative. Often these foundations have to be addressed in themselves before change can begin and people can recognize their common ground. This can take time but without it our work will falter and our careful constructions be short lived. The core foundation of service that Sts. Vincent and Louise promoted was the need to provide spiritual nourishment for those they served, not only for their material needs. To truly empower all to live out the Vincentian charism in a systemic change project, spiritual formation is essential.

### **Strategy 10:**

***Promote learning processes where members of the group, especially the poor speak with one another about successes and failures, share insights and talents, and form effective servant-leaders in the local community in the tradition of St. Vincent de Paul.***

Forming people for leadership roles is fundamental for bringing about long-lasting change. But experience teaches that a vertical style of leadership is rarely effective in systemic change projects. Servant leaders are needed, people who listen, help the group to formulate projects, involve it in implementing them, and engage it in evaluating and re-structuring them.

Of course, the concept of “servant leadership” jumps off the pages of the New Testament, and is found in many other religious traditions. In a sense, servant leaders assume the role of followers, listening to others and empowering them to reach their goals. They realize that, when they listen well, their followers accomplish more. Searching for ways to emerge from poverty is a risky enterprise. Servant leadership encourages the community to take the risks that are needed.

## **The Response of the Vincentian Family**

Below can be seen the “rationale” for Systemic Change through various official documents of members of the Vincentian Family.

### *The Congregation of the Mission*

Constitutions 18: “Following St. Vincent, who, like the Good Samaritan of the gospel parable (**Lk 10:30-37**), gave effective help to the abandoned, provinces and members should earnestly strive to serve those rejected by society and those who are victims of disasters and injustices of every kind.”

Final Document, General Assembly 1998, II, 4: “In our work of prophetic evangelization, we should keep these characteristics in mind: attention to the reality of human society, above all to the causes of the unequal distribution of the goods in the world; participation in the life and conditions of the poor; cooperation with associations established to defend human rights and to promote justice and peace.”

### *The Company of the Daughters of Charity*

Constitutions 24e: “Saint Vincent reminds the Sisters that love embraces justice (SV VII, 115). The Daughters of Charity are constantly solicitous for the development of every person in all the aspects of their being.... They commit themselves to work for social transformation to change the unjust structures that cause poverty.”

### *The Society of St. Vincent de Paul*

Rule 7.1: “The Society is concerned not only with alleviating need but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it. It is, therefore, committed to identifying the root causes of poverty and to contributing to their elimination. In all its charitable actions there should be a search for justice; in its struggle for justice, the Society must keep in mind the demands of charity.”

7.6: “Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak out clearly against the situation, always with charity, with the aim of contributing to and demanding improvements.”

### *The International Association of Charity (AIC)*

From the AIC Assembly held in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, February 6-10, 2005: “The mission of AIC is to bring an effective contribution to eradicating poverty. Its objective is to “act together against the different types of poverty, against the inequalities and unfair conditions under which a large percentage of humanity suffers: the poor. Moreover, AIC wishes:

- To be a transformative force in society and fight against different types of poverty;

- to commit itself primarily to stand with women throughout the world;
- to reinforce the participation of the poor;
- to encourage collaboration and networking.

Because it is aware of the co-responsibility of all involved, AIC wants to participate in programs of public politics.