

Rev. William Christensen, S.M.

Rev. Christensen is a Catholic priest and economic development expert who is a living example of global social justice in action. In 1987, together with a Muslim economist, he founded the Institute of Integrated Rural Development (IIRD) in Bangladesh, which was nominated in 2000 for the prestigious King Baudouin Prize and was selected by the World Bank's Global Development Network as "one of the ten most innovative projects in the world with the most potential for helping humanity." The IIRD works with local staffs in six project areas, assisting about 800 rural villages (with a total population of 1.2 million people) and 60,000 families identified for IIRD's comprehensive "poverty eradication program." Each year IIRD "graduates" about 4,000 families out of poverty, and has reduced the poverty level in its first target area from 37% in 1987 to 18.7% in 2002. Since 1987 IIRD has enrolled 42,000 children in primary school, installed 2,000 drinking water wells, improved the shelters of 9,400 severely poor families, employed 1,500 in its fisheries, forestry and silk projects, and meets weekly with more than 20,000 women from poor families in various community-based education, health and development projects.

He also organized the Bangladesh chapter of CESJ in Dhaka, which has been meeting periodically since 1999, bringing together lawyers, economists, development experts, business and labor leaders and academics to promote understanding, teaching and applications of binary economics and the CESJ principles of economic and social justice. With CESJ and a team of professionals from Bangladesh and the U.S., Fr. Christensen is working to establish the "JBM Garment Factory," a Justice-Based Management alternative to sweatshops that will employ several hundred women garment workers who will also be co-owners of the enterprise. In addition to serving as a Counselor and member of CESJ, he is a founding member of the Global Justice Movement (.ORG) based in Canada.

Born in Chicago in 1942, Fr. Christensen became inspired in 1957 as a high school student in Kirkwood, Missouri by a talk on social justice given by CESJ co-founder, the late Fr. William Ferree, to become the first Marianist missionary on the South Asian sub-continent. From 1965-1978 he was an activist on racial issues and migrant farm worker problems in St. Louis, serving as an organizer in the Cesar Chavez-led grape and lettuce boycotts. After being ordained as a priest in 1973, in 1978 the Society of Mary granted his continuing request to work in India, where he spent the next 6 years in socioeconomic development projects. Working against the grain of local politics, he was asked to leave. He then spent a year in Nepal helping the government design an integrated development program, after which he began his work with the poorest of the rural poor in Bangladesh.

He received a B.A. degree in English in 1964 from St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas and a M.A. degree in sociology from St. Louis University, where he also pursued a master of divinity degree. He entered the Marianist Seminary in 1969. He is a recipient of CESJ's Soldier of Justice award. [TOP>>](#)