Social Justice Handbook

SMALL STEPS TO A BETTER WORLD

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FOREWORD BY John Perkins

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Introduction

During the past several years of my ministry at both Willow Creek Community Church and Hillside Covenant Church, I continually come into contact with the needs of the poor. Time and again I am amazed at the material needs present. I am also amazed at the wealth of Christian life and experience found by faithful believers who were serving others, living faithfully and trying to overcome the challenges of poverty.

My ministry experience has provided me with personal encounters and a glimpse of problems and struggles that are outside of my normal everyday paradigm: a little boy who suffers from such severe asthma that his medicine takes more space in his home than all of his other material possessions; a young mother who continually struggles to hold down a job without having the resources to provide childcare for her three young children; a grandfather who lives in the basement of an abandoned building because he isn't able to garnish enough social security to pay for rent. These encounters propelled me on a journey of trying to grasp what it means to respond to these kinds of needs through Christian ministry. The church so often has solid theology and teaching, but sometimes neglects to respond to the physical needs that present themselves right on our doorstep and beyond.

In January 2005, I began a ministry at Willow Creek Community Church that focused on social justice. Of course there had been and were others at Willow who were knowledgeable about and valued social justice, but I wanted there to be an organized movement within the church that not only extended compassion but started to get at the root of the issues that cause poverty, oppression and injustice.

At the same time there seemed to be a movement sweeping through the evangelical church on a national, if not global, front. I began to notice articles on social justice appearing in Christian magazines. Other partner churches were beginning to ask similar questions about the church's role in shaping society and leading reform. Over and over I heard talk in Christian circles about what it means to live out Matthew 25, what it means to put faith in action as described in James 2 and Isaiah 58. Everywhere I turned it seemed people were asking what it means to respond to the poor and the oppressed in society. I was caught up in the excitement, but deep in my soul I also believed that there was an impending need not yet being met by the church.

Of course, this conversation wasn't really new. Believers in the early church (Acts 2) were attentive to the needs of the orphans and the widows. From early antiquity the church often carried the responsibility of meeting the needs of society's most unfortunate. As I began this journey in pursuit of social justice, I longed to understand the deeper meaning of biblical justice and its relationship to the more familiar concepts of compassion, mercy and charity.

I began to search. I read books. I went to seminars. I met individuals who will be crowned with many jewels in heaven because of their activism and efforts on behalf of the gospel. I was exposed to some of the greatest leadership and wisdom about the questions of social justice. I

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have been blessed by the wisdom and council of experts in the field: John Perkins, the founder of the Christian Community Development Association; Jim Wallis, the leader of Sojourners magazine and Call to Renewal; Brian McLaren of the Emergent Village; Gary Haugen, founder, president and CEO of International Justice Mission; just to name a few. While I am greatly indebted to these leaders, I still came away from these encounters feeling somewhat discouraged—there didn't seem to be a place where the questions I was asking for myself and on behalf of my church were being addressed. I was inspired by churches and individuals, but was left with little guidance as to how to apply what I was learning to ministry at Willow Creek. It seemed that no one could tell me how, in the context of my leadership, to implement the many new things I was learning.

I went to all of these events asking questions, and no one seemed to have the specific answers that I was looking for. I wanted to know the down and dirty pragmatics—the very basics of social justice, beyond academic articulation and systematic theology. I wanted to know how to define social justice. I wanted to understand the difference between social justice and biblical justice. I wanted to know at the core of my being what it means to live out social justice individually and corporately as the body of Christ.

To a degree every Christian and every church leader will come to the point where he or she personally grapples with an issue. By the grace and direction of God's prompting, it is the leader's responsibility to define what it means to fully embrace this problem in the context of their ministry. That has been my journey. This book is a compilation of the basic fundamentals that I have learned the past few years as I wrestled with these questions. My hope and desire is that all of the struggles our ministry has experienced might provide support and encouragement for others who are asking the same questions. This book is Social Justice 101. The basics. The fundamentals. These are what have been the core tenets of our journey, though they by far are not comprehensive.[1]

In the past Willow's evangelism ministry hosted conversations around the "big questions" of life. During the summer of 2005, we held a five-week series called "Biggies Unplugged." This series broke big issues down into small discussion groups. My group led one of these unplugged conversations. The basic outline for this book was developed during that event. Our conversations were certainly unplugged. We had the biggest table. On a given Sunday we had anywhere between fifteen and twenty people. We argued and wrestled and disagreed and prayed and began the spiritual process of asking some hard questions. I hope this book will provide a similar opportunity. Read with the desire to engage. This book is a "doing" book—calling the church into action. The evangelical church has strayed from its original roots. We must return to our twofold purpose of a contemplative tradition reflecting good theology and a church that put its beliefs into practice through action.

Social justice is complicated. People have strong ideas about it! Say "social justice" to one person, and he or she will think you are a saint, following in the footsteps of Mother Teresa. But someone else may throw a fit and declare that you are a liberal activist who has abandoned the true fundamentals of Scripture. There is a broad spectrum of history, beliefs and perspectives about social justice. This book is designed to explore the basics of social justice from a biblical perspective, rooted in Scripture and the core tenets of the Christian faith.

How to Read This Book

Social Justice Handbook is divided into two main parts. Part one, "Foundations of Social Justice," is meant to be read chapter by chapter and provides a biblical and theological framework for justice, and addresses how individuals and the church can get involved. Chapters include information about the historical context of the evangelical church and its involvement in social justice. The movement from apathy to advocacy is one that should be pursued by all Christ followers. Part one addresses different types of advocacy and what involvement can look like for individuals and for the church.

Chapter one, "God's Heart for Justice," is a broad brushstroke of the theological foundation for social justice. What is biblical justice? What does the Old Testament have to say about it? How about the New?

Chapter two focuses on definitions and questions about social justice. What is social justice? In order to become an advocate of justice, we first need to understand some of the basic issues surrounding social justice. This chapter addresses whether or not there is a difference between social justice and charity or compassion. Some people think they are all the same thing. I would suggest that they are correlated, related and a part of the same family, but they are very different ideas and involve different actions. Most evangelical churches do a decent job at compassion, but in general they do a poor job of exercising justice.

Chapter three provides a history of Christian social justice in the Americas. Words and works are both vital modes of ministry. This chapter gives a brief summary of the history of how people who embraced one or the other came to be so opposed and differentiated. Few would disagree that the church of the future must find a balance between the two, living out holistic Christian ministry in a balance between works and words, actions and study of the Word.

Chapter four addresses the process people must embark on to allow their hearts to be opened and broken toward those who are most affected by injustice and oppression. God has called his people toward a radical transformation that involves not only the mind and heart, but the feet and the hands as well. In Jesus' inaugural address he called his followers to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom to the captives and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. This chapter examines what it means for apathetic Christians to become individual and corporate agents of justice.

Chapter five focuses on the roles individuals, church, community and government can play in advocating social justice. Individuals, moved to respond to issues they have encountered, possess the energy and conviction that can be used to start a movement in their small groups, churches and communities. As individuals move from apathy to advocacy and invite others to join on the journey, social justice will be lived out and the kingdom of God will enter in!

Part two, "Social Justice Issues," is arranged alphabetically. It can be read front to back but is designed to be used more topically, as both a reflective tool and a reference guide. This part of the book wrestles with the nitty-gritty. Since social justice can be so nebulous and hard to define, it is important to understand the "core issues"—AIDS, the death penalty, education, the environment, health care, housing and poverty—of social justice. These topical entries are not comprehensive. They do, however, represent fundamental issues that are deeply seeded with pain, suffering, oppression and the lack of justice. These core issues, and many more, must be understood so that the church can respond with the strength and power of the Christian faith.

Many of the topics discussed are overwhelming. Do not be discouraged! My hope is that this book will serve as a resource and provoke questions that you might not have otherwise considered. It might even encourage you and others around you to take action, to step out in faith, preparing the soil with the hope that God will make it grow. The material includes descriptions of the topics, relevant statistics and other basic information, potential action steps, and resources for further study. In addition, the following features are found throughout the book.

Profiles. There are several people and ministry profiles that provide firsthand accounts of a ministry or person involved in social justice advocacy.[2] Learning about the advocacy efforts of others can be a great encouragement in our own pursuit of justice.

Spiritual reflection exercise. While this book is full of action items, it is important to take time to reflect on how God is moving in your own life. How is he calling you to personally respond? Spiritual reflection exercises encourage us to take the time and space to reflect about how God is personally leading us.

Awareness exercise. Much of the injustice that is perpetrated around the world stems from ignorance about the ways power, privilege and resources affect those who have limited opportunity and wealth. These exercises are a first step to raising awareness among individuals and the larger community about the stories of people groups who have experienced injustice in the United States and around the world.

Take action. This book provides practical first steps for getting involved and becoming an advocate of social justice. Many of the action items listed are small but important attempts to make a difference in the world. As each person progresses in the journey, I encourage strategic thinking about what action could and should be taken as the Christian community rises up in response to injustice around the world.

For further study. Each section includes references "For Further Study." Though some of the suggested readings come from a Christian perspective, the Christian community has not done enough scholarship in some topics or fields. Thus many of the readings are written by secular authors. I do not personally endorse the teachings in all of the recommended readings. I do, however, believe that the church should be informed and should engage with secular scholarship. My hope is that these readings will expand our understanding and help inform a Christian response to the issues being discussed.

Read this book to discern how God may be moving you to live a little different—or maybe even radically different! God clearly calls his children to be agents of justice:

> He has shown all you people what is good.
> And what does the Lord require of you?
> To act justly and to love mercy,
> and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6:8)