

Justice and Faith

Individual Spirituality and Social Responsibility
in the Christian Reformed Church in Canada

Key Informant Interview Report

September 2014

Introduction

This report summarizes the findings of 12 key informant interviews with members of the Christian Reformed Church in Canada. These interviews were conducted as part of a 2-year research project exploring the relationship of justice and faith in the spiritual lives of Canadian members of the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA).

The Justice and Faith project is a partnership between the Institute for Christian Studies' Centre for Philosophy, Religion, and Social Ethics, the Canadian Ministries of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and the Centre for Community Based Research. It is funded by a Partnership Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), and by cash and in-kind contributions from the research partners.

The interviews focused on three areas:

1. The relationship between justice and faith as practiced in the CRC;
2. The extent to which justice is currently a priority in the faith lives of CRC people; and
3. Next steps for encouraging and enabling CRC congregants to embrace justice as an integral part of Christian faith and life.

Key informants included both ordained and lay leaders, providing insights from a range of perspectives, including those of different genders, ethnicity, age, etc. They were asked to draw on their own understanding and experience, and to reflect on the understandings and experiences of others in their congregation. Thus, these interviews provide a “balcony view” of the relationship between justice and faith in the spiritual lives of CRC congregants.

The key informant interviews are one of three data collection methods in the Justice and Faith project, alongside a literature review and a CRC member survey. Reports on the findings of the other methods, along with more information about the project, may be found at www.crcna.org/CanadianMinistries/justice-and-faith-project or www.icscanada.edu/cprse.



1. The relationship between justice and faith as practiced in the CRC

1.1 How do people come to their understandings of justice?

When asked how they understand justice, most key informants directly linked their understanding of who God is and how God acts with how they, as Christian people, should be and act. Key informants displayed diverse understandings of the nature of God and God's actions. This sometimes led to quite different conclusions about how Christians imitating God should act. For instance, based on their understanding of how Christ would respond to injustice or harmful situations, some key informants concluded that we should help others in trouble no matter what. Others concluded that perhaps we shouldn't pursue addressing injustices, because Jesus calls us to turn the other cheek and accept abuse:

“I often tell people, ‘What would Jesus have done in this situation? Would he have demanded to see their T4 and their budget and how they're spending their money, or would he have reached out to them and increased their sense of self worth?’ You know, maybe that's where justice has to start, I think.”

“I wonder if Christians somehow have a little bit of an uncomfortable feeling about pursuing justice and defending right when Jesus urges us to turn the other cheek, to accept abuse, you know.”

Key informants displayed diverse understandings of the nature of God and God's actions. This sometimes led to quite different conclusions about how Christians imitating God should act.

Likewise, though the difference was less marked, differing conceptions of God the Father led to different foci of action: one key informant advocated pursuing justice all over the world, while another key informant argued for blessing a particular community through submission to God and humble service. Both of these responses were grounded in God's position as King or Sovereign:

“Reformed Christians have a very broad view of both the church and God's sovereignty, and God, who is just, must thus be pursuing justice all over the world. As Christians it's our duty and our calling to be able to help with that.”

“God is the King. He's given us authority to act on His behalf. And when we do that correctly through submission and through humble service we see the power of God at work through the Holy Spirit. And when I release people to do the work of blessing a community I talk very clearly

about the fact that we are called to serve humbly, to be like Jesus in Philippians chapter 2, that aspect of humble service.”

1.2 What is justice?

Key informants’ definitions of justice can be grouped into four broad categories. In most cases key informants identified several different definitions of justice at play among people they knew, sometimes indicating that one definition represented the majority opinion in their congregation. Almost all key informants reported several understandings of justice within their congregation, suggesting that no congregation or group falls neatly into one of the categories below. Not all key informants preferred to use the term “justice,” but used other terms to convey the same concept.

1.2.1 Justice is helping where help is needed

This is the largest category of justice definitions; all but one of the key informants reported this understanding of justice in their congregation. It also includes the most diversity of viewpoints among its adherents. The spectrum here runs from what many key informants described as charity, all the way to attempts to end systematic oppression. All definitions include the concept of providing help to those who need it, but they differ on what this looks like in practice.

The language used to describe justice by people in this group includes words or phrases like “rights-based,” “fairness,” “equality,” “meeting needs,” “helping,” and “restorative.” All of these definitions worked with the concept of righting wrongs.

“There are folks in our congregation who would understand justice definitely as being, you know, hands and feet and living it out in terms of 'help our neighbours when there's a need'; to administer to that need whether they're neighbours at church or neighbors outside or whatever.”

“I think people in my congregation would understand justice as, very simply, treating all people fairly and with dignity and allowing everyone an adequate wage or means, opportunity to make a livelihood, something to that effect. Maybe continuing in terms of defending justice would involve speaking against oppression and ill treatment of all people.”

Justice is helping where help is needed:

rights-based
fairness
equality
meeting needs
helping
restorative

1.2.2 Justice is retributive judgment

Definitions in this category understand justice as rewarding or punishing people according to their actions; that is, giving people what they deserve based on moral merit. Phrases like “God’s punishment” were also occasionally used.

“I think for others of our congregation, justice would be seen in terms of God’s punishment; so they’d think of Him and they would immediately go to the Old Testament and a certain point of view of the Old Testament God: discipline, and right and wrong, and finding the appropriate penalties for wrong things, and working toward honouring God in better ways.”

Half of all key informants reported that this view of justice was held in their congregation. However, it is the only understanding of justice that none of the key informants claimed as their own.

1.2.3 Justice is making disciples

For people in this group, justice is the work of making and growing disciples of Jesus. Slightly fewer than half of key informants reported this understanding of justice, using phrases like “bringing people to God,” “mission trips,” “increasing the kingdom,” and “quiet discipling.” Other words such as “mentoring,” “family,” “guidance,” and “caretaking” were also used. There was also a higher tendency among some of the informants in this group to prefer other words, such as “blessing” “being-with,” and “obedience,” instead of “justice.”

“If we intentionally are in this framework of bringing *shalom*, then it also cultivates the gospel, right? People are drawn to Christ through us doing justice. So even though the centre really is still the person of Jesus...the repercussions of it, the fruit of it, is that justice is done, and as we do that it brings more people to Christ. So it’s the cultivating of the soil kind of thing.”

“That integration of cultivating awareness of what God is up to and being in step with Him, integrating that awareness by just simply being present. [P]roviding our church facility to non-church members or people who aren’t Christian is one way that illustrates our understanding of the relationship between justice throughout the Christian faith. It’s about being-with, again: come and be with us.”

Justice is retributive judgment:

merit
reward
punishment

Justice is making disciples:

bringing people to God
mission trips
increasing the kingdom
quiet discipling
mentoring
family
guidance
caretaking

1.2.4 Justice is restoring creation

Key Informants who reported this understanding of justice relied heavily on the concept of *shalom*, signifying justice, peace and restored relationships in all aspects of human life and non-human creation. They also used phrases such as “responsibility,” “all areas of life,” “neighbour,” “Kuyperian,” and “fullness.” The concept of God calling us to right wrongs and restore creation, God’s kingdom was central to this group.

“The biblical call for justice is not to a particular belief of people, it cuts across all of that. It’s God’s call to restoration in all areas of life.”

Slightly more than half of key informants reported this understanding of justice. They were also the most likely to talk about ending injustice as well as pursuing justice, compared to other categories.

1.3 How are justice and faith related?

After describing what justice meant to people in their congregation, key informants were asked how their congregation understood and practiced the relationship between justice and faith. The interviews yielded three main answers to this question:

1. Justice is integral to Christian faith,
2. Justice and Christian faith are understood to be complementary, but this fails to be lived out in the congregation’s practice, and
3. Hesitancy, nervousness, or other discomfort regarding the idea that pursuing justice is integral to Christian faith.

Key informants reported that a large majority of CRC congregants would fall into the second category, while fewer would be in the first and third categories.

1.3.1 Justice is integral to Christian faith

Key informants who reported an active integration of justice in the faith lives of their congregations identified two rationales for this integration: humans as image-bearers of God (*imago dei*), and the redemptive character of the biblical narrative.

The Christian doctrine of the *imago dei* (being created in the image of God) formed a common, guiding logic for actively integrating justice and faith, reported by slightly fewer than half of key

Justice is restoring creation:

responsibility
all areas of life
neighbour
Kuyperian
fullness

shalom:

completeness,
soundness, welfare,
peace

imago dei:

“image of God”

informants. Since *all* human beings share the likeness of God, active or passive participation in injustice affecting other humans must be understood as an injustice against God.

“The Biblical witness says that we must respect all people. Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity – not by their own merits, but because they are created in the image of God. If we have a high view of humanity, that will carry over into all kinds of areas of justice: how we deal with the impoverished, how we deal with the homosexual issue, how we deal with gender issues, how we deal with abuses and everything else.”

Similarly, several key informants relied on the Reformed emphasis on the biblical narrative as a story of redemption to explain the active integration of justice and faith.

“What do I consider the Biblical witness concerning social justice to be? I think that we're called to reconciliation. I can't quote scripture chapter and verse, but I know we are called to a ministry of reconciliation, called to be salt and light in all areas of life. That's the Biblical witness. We work towards restoring God's kingdom here on earth in all areas of life.”

1.3.2 Justice and faith should be integrated, but we're not sure what that means or how to act on it

On the level of theological belief, nearly all key informants said that being a Christian meant that one was called, in some way, to pursue justice. Many, however, expressed uncertainty about what that meant. A clear majority of key informants identified this discrepancy between intellectual understanding and practical action, giving several reasons why it might be the case:

1. Difficulty translating beliefs about justice into practice

Several key informants admitted that a theological commitment to the integration of justice and faith was difficult to translate into the organizational structure or practices of the congregation on a day-to-day, practical basis; they didn't know where to begin, or felt a lack of clarity regarding what justice looks like in practice.

“In theory, if we were talking big picture, I think everybody would say yes, justice and faith are integrated. Well, how that plays out in practice is perhaps the part where we get a little bit stuck.”

A clear majority of key informants identified this discrepancy between intellectual understanding and practical action.

“This is such a big thing as I look at it – the word ‘justice’. I guess it’s been hard to wrap my arms around. I think I’m just starting to get at pieces of it. But I’ve kind of avoided it because it’s such a big thing, so you know, what piece do I take, or what am I working on? What does it mean?”

“I’ve often wrestled with what does pursuing justice mean, and I wrestle with that in the context of local mission and developing opportunities for people to bless our community and to serve.”

“When you start reading scripture through the lens of justice it’s just ... it blows your mind, and it just feels... Where do you start?”

2. Disparity between views of those in leadership, and the congregation

A disparity between church leadership and the congregation on justice issues also came up multiple times in the interviews. Whereas trained leaders in the CRC tended to be forthright about their commitment to the integration of justice in a life of faith, these same leaders often cited instances in which their congregants would be likely to hold very different views:

“So there’s an element of fear that, you know, we can speak of justice in broad terms and say it’s a wonderful thing but when it becomes reality then people become very cautious, and you have to work hard as a pastor to get people to get past that.”

3. Not the right word

Some key informants preferred to use other words or phrases to describe God’s call to justice. Without denying that justice and faith ought to be integrated, they used words such as “help” or “blessing” that seemed to better characterize the organizing principles of their congregation’s practical engagement with its community, and would likely be used in place of ‘justice’. Words like “volunteering” and “relationship building” were also used.

“We’ve not chosen to flush those things out in the words charity or justice. We use the word bless and tell people ‘Look, when you bless someone you’re caring for them, you’re providing for something or you’re protecting them from something.’ And that’s more covenantal language in my mind, to be a blessing to someone.”

“When you start reading scripture through the lens of justice it’s just ... it blows your mind, and it just feels.... Where do you start?”

“Would [people in my congregation] categorize their work as charity or justice? I don't know if they'd use those words really. I think they would say they're volunteering. They'd use that verb. I think they'd talk a lot about making relationships.”

“The word 'justice' doesn't come up in the middle of it. 'Help' would come up, loving your neighbour, caring for needs that are there.”

1.3.3 Hesitancy, nervousness, or discomfort with the integration of justice and faith

A small minority of key informants reported worries about viewing justice and faith as complementary or integrated. Several reasons were given as explanations:

1. Justice discourse compromises the unique mission of the church

Key informants in this group shared a common worry that justice issues tend to become “ends in themselves.” They were especially critical of what they perceived as a contemporary movement within the CRC that views theology and the missional character of the church as secondary to making the world a more just place. This movement, in their opinion, compromises the church's mission insofar as it reduces the church to “just another welfare institution” rather than Christ's body.

“And then one more, which I'm sure is a big part of why justice is not a bigger priority, is that Christians are afraid that we are going to slip into the danger of preaching a social gospel, and the local church will become another community centre or an advocacy group rather than being a distinct church.”

“There's a disproportionate number of people in the Christian Reformed Church who are just really, really bent on this idea of justice. But the shadow side of that is that they are so frightened of the word of God being brought in the middle of those scenarios that we see a very deep divide between sharing the word of God and serving on behalf of or standing up for justice.”

“So when we say that justice is a central concern...my concern is it becomes kind of an end in itself, right? And Jesus can become just a metaphor or an illustration of a just society.”

“So when we say that justice is a central concern...my concern is it becomes kind of an end in itself, right? And Jesus can become just a metaphor or an illustration of a just society.”

2. Justice as “left,” or “liberal thinking”

Some key informants observed that there were people in their congregation who had concerns about the perceived “leftist” tone of justice discourse in the CRC:

“I’ve noticed sometimes when the younger generation start to talk about justice and the way that they refer to justice, the older generation sometimes get a little bit nervous about it becoming a social gospel thing, and they get worried about it being separated from the life of faith.”

“For a long time our church had collections for the Christian Labour Association (CLAC) and Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ). Those collections disappeared. They were associated with ‘lefties’, ‘liberal thinking’, and we we’re not going to support that kind of crap. I mean, that’s a little blunt, but that’s basically what it boiled down to.”

3. Justice is for the government, faith is for the church

Several key informants noted that some people viewed church as a place to worship, not to talk about justice issues. This seemed to be connected with a certain understanding of the notion of sphere sovereignty.

“What hinders a church from assuming a deeper burden for issues of justice and being an advocate of justice? I think one is the view that justice belongs to the realm of government. We want to hang on to the various spheres and not overlap, get into other institutional spheres. So, the government is involved with justice, the church is involved with building faith and spreading the gospel, and charity as well.”

4. Lack of understanding the Biblical call to justice, or saying that’s not the call

Lastly, some key informants noted that a lack of understanding of Biblical teaching regarding justice was getting in the way of integrating justice more fully into congregants’ faith practice.

“I think due to a lack of maybe fully understanding what the Bible is teaching us regarding justice and faith, a fair amount of people may see them as separate things. Faith is, ‘I believe in God’, and justice is the poor people that don’t have enough or aren’t taken care of or whatever. That those two are the same thing maybe even, I think for some people

“I’ve noticed sometimes when the younger generation start to talk about justice and the way that they refer to justice, the older generation sometimes get a little bit nervous about it becoming a social gospel thing, and they get worried about it being separated from the life of faith.”

will be—well, it'll be a bit of a challenge to accept that.”

One key informant worried that the emphasis on “redeeming all things” in calls for integrating justice with one's faith, is itself unscriptural:

“I don't like the idea of justice being central in the sense that when I look at the word 'central' my concern is that doing justice can have a very post-millennial triumphalist tone to it. And what I mean by that is...people talk about how we are redeeming all things, and I just don't see that as scriptural. We're not redeeming all things. Christ someday will redeem all things, if we give expression to our faith in all areas of life and all that. But there's only one thing that's fully and finally redeemed, and that's our hearts, right? It's our persons, right? We are right with Christ permanently and forever.”

After stating these discomforts with integrating justice and faith, many of the same key informants would return to the Biblical narrative, acknowledging that Scripture strongly calls for justice:

“When we read the Prophets' words, read in the Psalms how God has a heart for the widow and the orphan, that God especially loves them, right? And how the nation was judged in the Prophets for neglecting to do justice, right? Yeah, Micah 6, those kind of texts are, you know—*what does the Lord require of you?* This is what worship is.”

“People talk about how we are redeeming all things, and I just don't see that as scriptural. We're not redeeming all things. Christ someday will redeem all things, if we give expression to our faith in all areas of life and all that. But there's only one thing that's fully and finally redeemed, and that's our hearts, right? It's our persons, right?”

2. To what extent is doing justice currently a priority in the faith lives of CRC congregants?

Having defined justice and described its greater or lesser relation to a life of Christian faith, key informants were asked to identify the extent to which justice seemed to be a priority in the faith lives of their congregation members.

Three quarters of the key informants agreed that justice is a secondary concern for people in their congregation, compared to just a couple who stated that justice is a primary concern for people in their congregation. None thought that most people in their congregation would consider justice to be of no concern, though one key informant noted that all three of those categories were represented in their congregation.

2.1 Why is or isn't justice a priority?

Most if not all key informants agreed with the normative claim that justice *should* be a priority in the lives of Christian Reformed congregants. Two informants suggested that the emphasis on the integration of faith into all areas of life, which lies at the very roots of the reformed tradition, should encourage CRC congregants to pursue justice. Another argued that personal piety should be accompanied by public piety, which includes the pursuit of social justice. For another, their congregation's historical ties to Citizens for Public Justice led to a better understanding of justice and its requirements.

“This integration of faith in life, this is our roots. This is what it means to be reformed.”

“Strong advocates for social justice, and I'm with them, would want people to put into action their convictions that grow within the context of their personal and public piety.”

Several key informants mentioned a rural-urban distinction as relevant, but came to differing conclusions regarding its effect on justice as a priority. One key informant mentioned that rural communities retain some of the historical roots of reformed theology related to prioritizing justice. Other key informants observed that rural life generally discourages people from adopting a wider, even global, perspective, and that small town life encourages a form of judgmentalism that discourages the pursuit of justice for those who suffer on the margins of society:

“My feeling is that some of this Kuyperian vision sticks with the rural areas a little bit more, partly because of their involvement with Christian Farmer's Federation of Ontario.... Urbanization somehow, it's eroded that kind of stuff so fast.”

“These small towns sometimes have so little compassion because they're too close, they see too much and it's too easy to become judgemental.”

Several key informants also thought that age affected the priority of justice, though again, conclusions differed. One key informant mentioned that the older generation regards justice as necessary to faith life, while the younger generation blurs the distinction between charity and justice. In contrast, another informant suggested that justice concerns are a higher priority for youth, while a third echoed this sentiment but added that the older

“This integration of faith in life, this is our roots. This is what it means to be reformed.”

generation is still open to the conversation. Still another mentioned that middle-aged people are too preoccupied with immediate job and family concerns to give justice a high priority, while another suggested children are naturally more compassionate and can motivate adults.

“I wonder about the younger generation... I sometimes think that justice, and being involved in those kinds of things, is the only way that they can understand the gospel.”

“It seems like among the older people I've talked to, that charity is seen as something that must be part of the Christian life, but it's not always required of you, whereas justice is something that has to be done no matter what. And the younger people, I've noticed, have a notion of justice as fairness, but very much wrapped up with the notion of charity. I'm not sure they see a difference between the two.”

“The middle-aged ones are consumed with family and jobs and all that kind of stuff. I think that they would love to be more involved but they're busy.”

These varying and sometimes contradictory perspectives suggest that assumptions about the priority of justice in one's faith life based solely on age are liable to be mistaken, and are thus ill-advised.

These varying and sometimes contradictory perspectives suggest that assumptions about the priority of justice in one's faith life based solely on age are liable to be mistaken, and are thus ill-advised.

2.2 What are enablers and barriers to justice becoming a priority in congregations?

Having examined current priority levels, key informants were asked to identify specific enablers and barriers to justice becoming more of a priority in their congregations.

2.2.1. Key enablers for justice becoming a priority

Key informants offered 13 different factors that enable or encourage congregants to make justice an increased priority in their Christian faith life:

1. Education and awareness, sharing the stories of the plight of those who are oppressed.

“I think number one, we need to understand that justice is one of the pillars of Christian faith. And not a kind of a secondary thing that, ‘Oh, yes, it is mentioned in the Bible.’”

“You hear people's stories, and it makes you aware.”

“Communicating the stories of real people experiencing unfair treatment and the kind of future that they face helps my congregation embrace justice.”

“Perhaps a more specific focus by the denomination, I mean, with Calvin Seminary, in educating pastors in this specific area, and giving them the full denomination's backing to really preach this out, live this out in the way that they pastor, so that the congregation members see where this is coming from and see the foundation of it, and see that these pastors have been trained and educated in this. This isn't some rogue pastor's mission when they begin to talk about these issues, this is the biblical witness. Not just the reformed witness: this is the *biblical* witness.”

“Communicating the stories of real people experiencing unfair treatment and the kind of future that they face helps my congregation embrace justice.”

2. Cultivating a deep awareness of all human beings as created in the image of God.

“Real justice is the giving of full value to the other as a creature made in the image of God and reflecting His beauty.”

“I think those of us who believe justice should be a priority do so because we believe it's what it means to be a child of God. If I believe in God, the Creator, and if I believe that everybody is created in God's image, then I have to do whatever I can, or we can, to make sure that there is justice for all people and not just for a percentage of the people.”

The first two enablers were mentioned by nearly half of all key informants. The next several were each mentioned by a few key informants.

3. Direct experience of injustice inside the congregation or surrounding community.

“We'll never be able to achieve justice unless we see the injustices that are around us.”

4. Making justice concrete as opposed to abstract; pursuing a specific task.

“People want to know, ‘Okay, but what can I do? What very specific thing can I do to pursue justice in this specific situation? Don't give me a general statement about pursuing justice in regards to First Nations, right? Tell me what I can

do.’ And sometimes that's hard because sometimes it's not about the doing, it really is about the spiritual practice of a spiritual discipline, of sitting with the issue and wrestling with the issue, but at some point people get frustrated if they're not given some practical steps to take.”

“In the end, to me, the most important thing is how do we make it real.”

5. Sermons and Bible studies that intentionally focus on justice.

“One great thing would be if the pastor preached a sermon on justice at the same time that the Banner comes out, and the Banner's just completely all about justice, for example, and [people in our congregation] see that connection. They see oh, look, the pastor preached a sermon and now we're getting the Banner. It's the denomination saying, ‘Look, this entire issue is devoted to justice and what it means to do justice.’”

“In terms of becoming aware of the kind of oppression that people experience, injustices that are real right within our own country and even our own cities...yeah, it's hard to say. I don't know, read the gospel.”

6. Acting as Jesus' representatives in this world.

“If we're really going to be the hands and feet of Jesus we actually have to be using our feet and our hands. And that also means being present in the lives of people who are experiencing injustice, as well as doing charity and providing and protecting and caring for people.”

“As a pastor I'm very aware of the statement of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, Luke 4:18-19: The spirit of God is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoner and so on. So yeah, I see myself as a representative of Jesus and pursuing and continuing that mission of his in this world.”

7. Encouragement and guidance from congregational and denominational leadership; increasing access to existing denominational resources.

“For our congregation specifically, it's incredibly helpful when [an emphasis on the priority of justice] comes very directly from the Christian Reformed Church as a

“Don't give me a general statement about pursuing justice in regards to First Nations, right? Tell me what I can do.’ And sometimes that's hard because sometimes it's not about the doing, it really is about the spiritual practice of a spiritual discipline, of sitting with the issue and wrestling with the issue, but at some point people get frustrated if they're not given some practical steps to take.”

denomination, that this is something that is very important for us to do. So you start with that piece, they see it coming from the denomination, it's not just coming from the young people, or the pastor, it's coming from the foundation.”

8. Piety as an enabler for justice; paying attention to those things that sustain us spiritually.

“So really, living the movement and discipleship are a big part of our apprenticeship or how we do [justice]. But even when we worship it's part of how we read scripture, you know. God's calling us on a mission with this.”

“I think that if we are going to make this a part of the regular expectations of what it means to be a believer it has to be alongside those other things that are going to sustain us theologically and spiritually when we do those things. There has to be a back and forth between these two.”

“I think that if we are going to make this a part of the regular expectations of what it means to be a believer it has to be alongside those other things that are going to sustain us theologically and spiritually when we do those things.”

The last several enablers were mentioned by one key informant each.

9. Gratitude.

“There's a centrality of being able to live with gratitude to God, and justice and peace flowing from that.”

10. Growing visibility of income gap.

“We are aware of the growing gap between the rich and the poor, and a big income gap, and that I think is alarming to more and more people.”

11. The congregation's openness and hospitality to others.

“There definitely is this notion that we have a duty to help those who aren't as fortunate, but also a notion of a sort of hospitality and openness, which is very much wrapped up with the notion of justice most people have in our congregation.”

12. Being “wired” for justice.

“You have this group of people that have always been concerned about justice issues, right? It's just the way they're wired.”

13. Intergenerational activity.

“We are discussing intergenerational initiatives that highlight awareness of Native justice... thinking about how we can do things together as a congregation to raise all of our awarenesses. I think there's so many possibilities for growth and encouragement there to make justice a priority.”

2.2.2 Key barriers to justice becoming a priority

Key informants identified eleven barriers that inhibit justice from being or becoming a priority in their fellow congregants' Christian faith life:

1. The complexity and size or scope of justice issues.

Nearly half of the key informants observed that the perceived complexity, size or scope of justice issues, or the effort required to work for justice, inhibits people from becoming engaged. They also observed that charity seems easier for people to grasp and work toward than justice.

“Charity is much easier. And pursuing justice takes a lot of work. I think Christians, the churches, feel, ‘Boy, do we have the energy and the expertise to really pursue justice?’”

“One barrier is not understanding why we should make justice a key priority or not understanding what that looks like exactly. And then if we start to try and want to understand sometimes it feels very overwhelming.”

Other barriers mentioned by several key informants were:

2. Remoteness from experiences of injustice.

“To really be motivated and mobilized for justice there has to be a degree of indignation and anger, people have to see the injustices that are around us and say this isn't good, this is not the way it's supposed to be.”

3. “If we had the experience with injustices right within our own congregation or at least in our neighbourhoods much more than we do, we'd probably be stronger in terms of advocating for justice than we are.” People are too busy or have other priorities.

“Sometimes it seems like justice issues become just another thing to do, another event to go to, or another thing I'm supposed to read, and people are just saying well, we're busy.”

“Charity is much easier. And pursuing justice takes a lot of work. I think Christians, the churches, feel, ‘Boy, do we have the energy and the expertise to really pursue justice?’”

4. Fear or hesitancy toward approaching or accepting those who are different than ourselves.

“In our churches especially, you know, we tend to be quite homogenous and everyone is like us. And when you discover that there is someone else that's not like us I think there's an aspect of fear that may hold people back.”

5. Justice belongs to the realm of government; church and politics shouldn't mix.

“I don't think anyone would say justice shouldn't be a concern at all if they are true, Bible-believing Christians. But they might say – and many did say this to me in my first congregation – that it is our call as individual Christians to do the research and come to a decision on where you stand on certain issues and vote, but it shouldn't be a concern for the church to be active in that way, because then you're mixing politics and the church.”

6. Negative stereotypes of those experiencing injustice, especially First Nations.

“The bigger hill to climb, with the example of our First Nations neighbours, is to see them as equal members in a conversation.... I think we have a paternalistic view still. Whether it's refugees or First Nations neighbours or whoever, until we see them as fellow human beings who have gifts, talents, perspectives that can teach us, it'll be a hard time getting to actual justice.”

The last several barriers were mentioned by one key informant each.

7. Desire to keep faith and ministry focused on evangelism.

“A lot of people want to keep their faith and the ministry of the local church targeted on evangelism and spreading the gospel locally and internationally, versus issues of justice.” Churches with a strong justice focus are losing members, while other churches are growing in size.

“Churches that seem to have justice as a stronger priority also seem to be the churches that are dwindling in size and numbers. Those churches that are more conservative and evangelical are the ones that are growing. And that bugs me.”

“In our churches especially, you know, we tend to be quite homogenous and everyone is like us. And when you discover that there is someone else that's not like us I think there's an aspect of fear that may hold people back.”

“But they might say...that it is our call as individual Christians to do the research and come to a decision on where you stand on certain issues and vote, but it shouldn't be a concern for the church to be active in that way.”

8. Focus on personal, therapeutic aspects of faith life as opposed to social aspects.

“[there's a focus on] therapeutic theology rather than Christ in all areas of life.”

9. Fear of standing out; justice makes people uncomfortable.

“A good understanding of biblical justice and peace... it's going to rub some people the wrong way, I know it is.”

10. Fear of becoming simply an advocacy group, as opposed to a distinct church.

“Christians are afraid that we are going to slip into the danger of preaching a social gospel and the local church will become another community centre or an advocacy group rather than being a distinct church.”

3. Next Steps: Mobilizing CRC congregants to embrace justice as an integral part of Christian faith and life

Key informants were asked to share ideas for engaging Christian Reformed people on the topic of doing justice, and for encouraging and enabling them to embrace justice as an integral part of Christian faith and life. Their “nuts and bolts” suggestions were grouped into three themes, summarized below.

Constructive engagement and dialogue to deepen our understanding and action for justice is grounded in the common understanding that God calls us as Christians to do justice, as expressed in the Christian Reformed Church's mission statement: “As people called by God...we pursue God's justice and peace in every area of life.”

3.1 Providing a Biblical foundation

Building on the Bible and biblical understandings of justice was cited by key informants as the most important motivation or enabler for doing justice. Even if individual congregants disagreed on or dismissed certain concepts of justice and justice work, key informants noted that the call to do justice as an integral part of Christian faith must be understood as biblically based. Likewise, efforts to encourage and enable CRC people to further engage in doing justice must be rooted in the Bible.

Christian Reformed Church's mission statement:

“As people called by God,

We gather to praise God, listen to him, and respond.

We nurture each other in faith and obedience to Christ.

We love and care for one another as God's people.

We commit ourselves to serve and to tell others about Jesus.

We pursue God's justice and peace in every area of life.”

Although some referenced specific Bible passages as evidence of God’s call to justice – Micah 6:8 and the Prophets were the most common – most key informants pointed to the overarching Biblical story. There was consensus that justice is woven throughout the Bible, and that the whole of the Bible cannot be read without acknowledging the importance of justice. Several key informants expressed their disappointment that the biblical story is often reduced to a “set of rules,” or to “saving souls,” or to “having a personal relationship” with God or Jesus. Some key informants used words like “divert” and “minimize” to describe how the grander Biblical story can be lost as a result.

“We often minimize the biblical story as a set of rules we still live by, and we miss some of those bigger, more engaging, more inviting things of the biblical story – God's call to justice and peace, right? Instead it becomes more about personal life and me being good. That's all well and good but in a context such as a church I think it's got to be bigger and broader than that.”

Key informants agreed that any ways of further engaging and mobilizing CRC congregants in the pursuit of justice need to be based on this Biblical foundation.

3.2 Promoting an Environment for Continued Learning

Key informants suggested that justice engagement should be viewed in the context of lifelong learning. Several key informants described their personal experiences of coming to appreciate and pursue justice, each at a different stage on that journey. All key informants acknowledged that this journey takes significant time and learning, whether through books or interpersonal interactions. Many displayed humility when describing their journey, noting they still could learn more about justice. As one key informant said: “[T]o this day I often realize how much more I have to learn regarding this whole Biblical thinking about justice and what it means for society.... I have a long ways to go.”

Key informants viewed education about the relationship between justice and faith as an important first step in encouraging and enabling CRC people to pursue justice. One key informant observed, “It's an educational process, to be honest, of making people more aware that justice is a very integral part of being a Christian.” Another stated that it is important to address “why justice is a really important part of living out a faith-life and to what degree and in what ways we are expected to do that.” Yet

All key informants acknowledged that this journey takes significant time and learning, whether through books or interpersonal interactions. Many displayed humility when describing their journey, noting they still could learn more about justice.

another key informant indicated that it was important to go back to the CRC's Reformed roots and remind people that, “[integrating faith and justice] is what it means to be Reformed. This isn't some new younger generation liberal social gospel idea. This integration is where we come from.”

Key informants disagreed about how justice education could be provided most effectively to CRC congregants. Some suggested that specific or personal stories of justice (or injustice) would be a good starting point, while others suggested first developing a broader understanding of justice. One key informant shared that justice issues had not been well accepted in their congregation because that “bigger conversation” about justice had not yet occurred. Other key informants provided contrasting examples illustrating how education about justice in general had been merely an abstract concept if presented prior to specific examples.

Key informants agreed that who provides the education is an important factor in how well it will be received. Many key informants shared personal stories of interactions with particular individuals that positively shaped their understanding of justice. Others pointed to influential congregation members who strongly promoted or pursued justice. Several key informants agreed that it is also important for education to be provided by a broader organization and emphasized the importance of the denomination in this regard: “For my congregation it seems to be really helpful to see integrating justice and faith as a denominational initiative.”

“[Integrating faith and justice] is what it means to be Reformed. This isn't some new younger generation liberal social gospel idea. This integration is where we come from.”

3.3 Facilitating Opportunities to Partner

All key informants acknowledged the importance of partnerships in doing justice, and indicated that they partnered with various organizations. Most indicated extensive and enthusiastic partnerships. As one key informant stated: “[I]n terms of the magnitude or maybe the complexity of working for justice...we as a local congregation probably would not be able to have the tools, the know-how, and the energy to be able to pursue on our own a particular issue to fight for justice. It works best with partners.” A wide range of partners were identified, the vast majority of which were local organizations addressing a particular interest or need. Overall there was high regard for community agencies. Key informants valued the expertise they could bring to justice issues:

“Those agencies that are there, they're there to mobilize us, they're there to bring justice.”

Key informants reported that their congregations would be much more willing to partner with Christian organizations than with non-Christian organizations. For the most part, partnering with a non-Christian organization would have come out of a specific need where organizational “causes align.” As one key informant said: “Certainly we don't shy away from initiatives which are not explicitly Christian-faith based. At the same time working in concert with the body of Christ and maintaining a presence which clearly gives glory to God and Christ is a high value.” Although only one key informant indicated that a CRC church had blatantly rejected a partnership because it was non-Christian, there was a general hesitancy among other key informants. Some key informants indicated that they thought their congregation did partner with non-Christian organizations, but then were only able to list Christian organizations. One key informant indicated that non-Christian organizations were the most common partners for their congregation, but the majority of key informants conceded that they would only actively “seek out” Christian organizations.

“We need to have a robust understanding of creation and a richer understanding of God's call, the biblical call, to justice.”

4. Three Observations with Recommendations

Drawing on the wealth of data these voices have given us, we can venture three specific recommendations for further mobilizing CRC congregations and congregants to further integrate a concern for justice as a key component of their faith identity:

1. Deepen engagement with Scripture, and ground justice resources in it.

“We need to have a robust understanding of creation and a richer understanding of God's call, the biblical call, to justice.”

Nearly all of the key informants acknowledged that the Biblical witness is oriented toward justice; justice is “woven throughout” the biblical narrative, and that this narrative calls us to act justly. There was also consensus that deeper education about Scripture and justice (both for congregants and leaders, such as pastors) would have a positive effect on integrating justice practice into the faith lives of those in the CRC. Nearly half of the respondents mentioned Micah 6:8 by chapter and verse, quoted it from their memory, and cited it as something that shaped how they thought. “This is what worship is,” as one informant who had previously expressed hesitancy about justice-talk noted. Those citing the importance of justice in the Bible varied in their understanding of justice. The five key informants who specifically cited Micah 6:8 represented

Nearly all of the key informants acknowledged that the Biblical witness is oriented toward justice; justice is “woven throughout” the biblical narrative, and that this narrative calls us to act justly.

viewpoints from all four of the justice definition categories listed above, illustrating the uniting potential of basing mobilization efforts in scripture. Justice advocates in the denomination may want to employ Micah 6:8 in particular as an organizing principle for justice resources, while re-emphasizing an ongoing, and deepened, engagement with Scripture. They should show how responding to Micah 6:8 (among other passages) is *worship proper*. Doing so will not only deepen the Church's own understanding of what justice means for Christian faith, it will also help motivate people to pursue justice, without losing their spiritual roots or compromising their faith.

2. Use relational language in justice resources, and encourage building relationships.

"The category of relationship building kind of trumps all other categories."

Almost all key informants, with the possible exception of those who reported retributive views of justice, seemed to prefer to use relational language when talking about justice. Key informants used words like "family," "neighbour," and "relationship" in one way or another when they were asked to talk about justice, even if they preferred using other words instead of justice. Relational language, it seems, is something that should be more prominent when speaking of justice or providing justice education.

3. Explore connections and distinctions between "Faith" and "Church."

"Some people would theoretically say justice and faith go together, but they would also say 'no, that's not our role as a church, that's not what a church does'."

For most of the key informants who expressed concerns about integrating justice and faith, the problem with integration was not about faith as such, but about the Church. The question for them is whether the Church, understood as an institution or as a worship space, should give priority to justice-talk and justice-work; these concerns appear to have little to do with individual spirituality or faith. Perhaps exploring the distinction between institutional church and individual faith will provide greater insight regarding the challenges to mobilization, and what the Church can do to address them.

Micah 6:8:

"And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

For more information about this report or the Justice and Faith Project, please contact:

Ronald A. Kuipers

Director, Centre for Philosophy, Religion,
and Social Ethics

Institute for Christian Studies

rkuipers@icscanada.edu

888.326.5347

Steve van de Hoef

Justice and Faith Project Coordinator
Canadian Ministries, Christian Reformed
Church in North America

svandehoef@crcna.org

800.730.3490