

Justice and Faith: Mobilizing Christian Reformed Church Congregations for Justice

Executive Summary

The *Justice and Faith: Mobilizing Christian Reformed Church Congregations for Justice* report presents the findings of a pilot research study involving 37 CRC church leaders and members across Canada. The study was carried out collaboratively by the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC), the Centre for Philosophy, Religion and Social Ethics (CPRSE) at the Institute for Christian Studies, and the Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR). At the heart of this study was a shared desire to advance dialogue and action for justice within CRC congregations – believing that justice is a core part of God’s mission in the world to which God’s people are called.

We learned that the CRC as a denomination formally acknowledges justice as an integral part of its mission and vision. However, the understandings of justice among people “on-the-ground” are less emphatic and vary considerably. We also learned what enables and what prevents CRC congregations from embracing justice. Finally, research participants offered their suggestions for how CRC congregations could be better mobilized for justice.

This pilot project is situated within a larger mobilization and action research agenda of the CRC. We hope that these initial findings will provide an opportunity for dialogue and inspiration, and be a useful framework for the CRC to conduct more in-depth and engaging research in the future.

Project Purpose and Approach

The purpose of the *Justice and Faith* pilot project was to inform and advance the CRC’s justice mobilization efforts. These efforts encourage and enable CRC members and congregations to embrace justice as an integral aspect of Christian mission, vocation, and discipleship. As a pilot project, this study intended to provide a framework for more future research.

The research partners acknowledged that there are diverse understandings of the term “justice” and of “God’s call to justice,” as well as a range of practices that answer this call with action. The partners did not wish to impose a fixed or narrowly defined understanding of justice. Instead, they used an inductive approach, emphasizing listening, critical engagement, and mutual reflection. This project was intended to help construct a common foundation of understanding for continued dialogue and action.

Three main research questions were addressed:

1. How and to what extent are CRC people presently engaging in matters of justice?
2. What is enabling and what is preventing CRC people from pursuing justice?
3. What strategies would help CRC people to embrace justice?

The project followed a community-based research approach. The hallmarks of this approach include being community-situated, participatory, and action-oriented. Key informant interviews, regional focus groups, and a document review were used to collect data. The use of qualitative methods fit the inductive and exploratory nature of this pilot study.

How justice is understood

The CRC formally acknowledges justice as integral to its life and mission, as expressed in its mission statement (emphasis added):

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.

Numerous documents, including the operational statements of various CRC agencies and ministries, also acknowledge the need to advance justice in the world. These documents identify restoration and renewal, undoing systemic barriers, responding to people beyond acts of charity, and being responsive to Biblical authority as key characteristics of pursuing justice in all areas of faith and life.

Unlike the formal CRC understandings of justice, which were relatively consistent across documents, the “on-the-ground” congregant understandings of justice were wide-ranging.

Two important continuums emerged related to understandings of justice and doing justice. First, while some CRC members considered justice to be associated with “restoration and renewal,” others saw it as related to “retribution and right judgment.” Second, while some understood “doing justice” primarily as addressing systems and structural relationships, others understood “doing justice” to be primarily concerned with alleviating individuals’ needs.

Most key informants identified responding to individual need as the preferred model of a majority of CRC congregants. However, there was a perception that CRC understandings were shifting toward a more systemic understanding of justice.

Study participants identified three approaches to justice among CRC people: justice as a central concern for Christians; justice as a secondary concern; and justice as a peripheral concern for Christians. Participants observed that a majority of CRC people would understand justice to be a “second-tier concern,” with smaller proportions seeing justice as a central or peripheral concern for Christian faith and life.

How justice work is being done

Participants described a spectrum of justice activity within the CRC that reflected the range of understandings about justice – from charitable acts that addressed immediate needs to political advocacy and other ways of addressing systemic and structural inequities. Various forms of justice work were reported at each of the denomination, classis, and congregation levels.

Not all CRC justice work was expressed as a set of discrete actions. Doing justice was also viewed by some as a way of life – a lifestyle being demonstrated by some CRC people. Participants typically explained that this posture was evident in those who saw justice as a central part of their Christian life.

Enablers and barriers to doing justice

Participants identified several conditions that served as enablers, and those that served as barriers, to justice engagement.

Enablers included:

- casting a vision of justice that is Biblical,
- having leadership that promotes justice and provides guidance in doing justice,
- providing opportunities to learn about and experience situations of injustice and opportunities and to engage in dialogue about these experiences, and
- being part of a community that does justice.

Barriers included

- a lack of priority placed on doing justice as an aspect of faith,
- the relative lack of exposure to injustice,
- confusion or wariness about the relationship between justice and faith and resistance to changing these perspectives and actions, and
- fragmentation within and between churches at local, regional and denominational levels.

Future mobilization strategies

Several strategies to mobilize CRC people to understand and engage in doing justice emerged from the research. Participants suggested that developing a clearer Biblical vision of justice – including familiar notions of shalom and the kingdom of God, and relating justice to other spiritual disciplines and to a missional mindset – would be a primary way to encourage all CRC congregants to be more justice-minded.

Other mobilization strategies included:

- Creating safe and welcoming opportunities for dialogue about justice, specific justice issues, and doing justice were considered important for sorting through the complexities of justice.
- Raising awareness within the CRC constituency about God's call to justice in general and about particular justice issues was identified as a way to re-engage CRC people concerning justice.
- Clarifying the definition of justice and the relationship between charity and justice was also considered important for future awareness raising activities.
- Promoting justice leadership by supporting current leaders and developing future leaders was noted as important for developing capacity at all levels of the CRC for integrating justice and faith.
- Creating opportunities to confront the realities of injustice through personal contact and relationships with those who experience injustice was considered an important and powerful motivator for doing justice.
- The promotion and support of collaboration within and between the local, classical and denominational levels of the CRC was identified as necessary for enabling the CRC structures to facilitate justice action.

Conclusion and next steps

The *Justice and Faith* pilot project intended to inform and advance ongoing justice mobilization efforts in the Christian Reformed Church. Although limited in its reach and scope, the pilot project provides a reliable indication of justice commitment and action in the CRC. It identifies important enablers for and barriers to further justice action and suggests strategies to encourage CRC people to embrace justice as an integral part of Christian faith and life.

The *Justice and Faith* pilot project mobilized CRC people to more fully understand and work for justice. This was done primarily by creating space for conversation about how justice was understood and lived out. Numerous participants indicated that the project had encouraged them to reflect on how they understand and do justice, and had led to valuable conversations with others, and in some cases to justice action.

It is evident that the connection of justice and faith in the CRC can be explored in much greater breadth and depth, and that there is a desire among CRC leaders, members and staff to do so. The research partners have been awarded a grant to undertake a follow-up action research project entitled *Justice and Faith: Individual Spirituality and Social Responsibility in the Christian Reformed Church of Canada*. This follow-up project will be implemented over a period of two years (2013-15) and is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and grants from the CRC's Office of Social Justice, World Renew, and CRC Canadian Ministries.

Consistent with the community-situated and participatory approach of the Justice and Faith Project, we invite readers to provide feedback on this report, engaging its contents critically and constructively. We also invite you to share your ideas for the next project with us: what methods of engaging CRC people could be used, what information and outcomes you would consider valuable, and how you would like to be involved.

The full Justice and Faith pilot project report can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/JusticeFaith-PilotReport>.

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