



Justice and Faith: Mobilizing Christian Reformed Church Congregations for Justice

A Research Report

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A Research Report

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a 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 while the CRC as a denomination formally acknowledges justice as an integral part of its mission and vision, how people “on-the-ground” understand and live out justice is less emphatic and varies 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 is a pilot study within a larger mobilization and action research agenda of the CRC. Our hope is 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.

Background

Mobilizing CRC congregations to embrace justice as a core aspect of God's mission in the world is an important part of the CRC denomination in Canada. This research project builds on and seeks to strengthen this justice tradition within the CRC.

The CRC in Canada has a number of justice-related ministries, including the Office of Social Justice, Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue, Canadian Aboriginal Ministry Committee, and the Office of Race Relations. Many other ministries and agencies have programming related to justice, including Diaconal Ministries Canada, World Renew (formerly CRWRC), Canadian Ministries, Christian Reformed World Missions, and Christian Reformed Home Missions.

At a recent (2012) Social Justice and Human Rights conference, hosted by the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) and Emmanuel College (both in Toronto), it was suggested that the Christian Reformed Church and the Institute for Christian Studies form a partnership to jointly pursue a research project. The project would assist the CRC's justice mobilization work, especially in exploring how to move congregations and members to embrace a public justice perspective that goes beyond simple charity and benevolence.

The values and methods of community-based research include social justice, power sharing and participation, and are well aligned to assist in developing the CRC's justice mobilization work. The Centre for Community Based Research was identified as a valuable partner in leading a community-based project to uncover the barriers and opportunities to a wider embrace of justice as mission.

A pilot research study was subsequently developed through a series of meetings involving leaders of various CRC ministries and agencies. This initial study was to be funded internally by CRC and the ICS/CPRSE. The pilot study was designed to be exploratory and lead into a larger, more in-depth research project that would be externally funded. (The three study partners, led by the CPRSE, were successful in recently securing a Partnership Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a two-year follow-up study). This report summarizes the results of the pilot study.

Research Purpose and Approach

The purpose of this 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 in-depth and engaging action research in the future.

The research partners acknowledged that there are diverse understandings of the term "justice" and of God's "call to justice," and a range of practices that answer this

Study Partners

Christian Reformed Church in North America

A Christian denomination with approximately 300 churches in Canada and 800 in the USA.

Centre for Philosophy Religion and Social Ethics

An academic Centre, within the Institute for Christian Studies, which is affiliated with the Toronto School of Theology at the University of Toronto. CPRSE promotes philosophically primed and religiously attuned interdisciplinary research on leading questions of life and society.

Centre for Community Based Research

An independent non-profit social research organization located in Kitchener, Ontario. Since 1982, CCBR's mission has been to use research to develop communities that are responsive and supportive, especially for people with limited power and opportunity.

Community-based Research

“A research approach that involves active participation of stakeholders, those whose lives are affected by the issue being studied, in all phases of research for the purpose of producing useful results to make positive changes” (Nelson, Ochocka, Lord & Griffen, 1998, p.12).

call with action. This project did not wish to impose a fixed or narrowly defined understanding of justice. Instead, the research partners adopted 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.

The project addressed three main research questions:

1. How and to what extent are CRC people presently engaging in matters of justice? (Present Perspectives and Efforts)
2. What is enabling and what is preventing CRC people from pursuing justice? (Enablers and Barriers)
3. What strategies would help CRC people to embrace justice? (Future Strategies)

These questions were answered from a Canadian perspective, but could be applicable in both the Canadian and American contexts. Research findings in this report are summarized according to these three research questions.

The research study used a community-based research approach. The hallmarks of this approach include being community-situated, participatory and action-oriented (Janzen et al., 2012). The project demonstrated these hallmarks in the following ways:

Community situated

- A network of CRC leaders participated in project development and was regularly informed about project progress.
- A project steering committee guided the project design and implementation, including input into research questions, tool development, data gathering and analysis, report writing, and knowledge mobilization.
- Project funding was gathered from CRC agencies and offices and ICS/CPRSE, fostering “ownership” of the project.
- We sampled research participants who held diverse stakeholder perspectives within the CRC.

Participatory

- The project involved the collaboration of various CRC agencies, ministries and local leaders, the Centre for Philosophy, Religion and Social Ethics, and the Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR).
- The research team included representatives of all three study partners (CRC, CPRSE, CCBR).
- Steering Committee members were trained to facilitate focus groups.

Action-Oriented

- Key informants were encouraged to engage with their constituency prior to being interviewed.
- A knowledge mobilization strategy was developed that included creating a shorter summary report and sharing this summary with all research participants and stakeholders, and making it available to all CRC constituents.
- External funding was sought (and subsequently secured) to connect this pilot project to a larger justice mobilization action research initiative.

Research Methods

Multiple qualitative research methods were used to collect data. The use of qualitative methods fit the inductive and exploratory nature of this pilot study. Both primary data methods (information that we collected ourselves), and secondary data methods (information that others collected) were used to answer the three main research questions. The methods used were:

Key informant interviews

Fourteen telephone interviews were conducted with local, regional and denominational leaders in the CRC. Key informants were selected who could reflect on the perspectives and actions of others within the CRC, providing a "balcony view" of perspectives on God's call to do justice within the CRC. Key informants were identified according to purposive selection criteria that included: range in leadership positions within the CRC, geographic location across Canada, ethno-racial background, age, socioeconomic status, and gender. Interviews were 45-60 minutes long using a semi-structured interview guide that followed the three main research questions. Key informants were encouraged to engage others in their constituency in preparation for the interview. Interviews were recorded after receiving informed consent, and later transcribed.

Regional focus groups

Four focus groups were held in communities across Canada (i.e., Kitchener, Oakville, Calgary, and Milford, Nova Scotia). A fifth focus group (in Abbotsford) was organized but was canceled due to unforeseen circumstances. Groups ranged in size from four to seven participants (with a total of 23 people participating), and ranged in length from 60-150 minutes, following a semi-structured interview guide covering topics related to the three main research questions. Communities were selected to ensure geographic distribution across Canada (in areas of CRC concentration), and to include both urban and rural perspectives. Focus group participants were identified according to purposive selection criteria that included: mix of congregational and lay leaders; range in ethno-racial background, age, socioeconomic status, gender, and ability. Interviews were recorded after receiving informed consent, and later transcribed.

Document review

A limited review of 24 documents was conducted in order to provide an overview of CRC and Reformed understandings of justice (i.e., related to the first main research question). Documents included CRC websites, statements of beliefs, Synodical resources, books, and articles/essays identified by the project steering committee. Documents that were reviewed are included in the reference section of this report.

These methods provided insight into the perspectives of a variety of CRC people. While we were careful to select people according to selection criteria as much as possible, our sample was limited and likely favoured those within the CRC who are more overtly justice-oriented. It would be desirable for further research to engage a broader cross-section of CRC opinion than was possible in this pilot study.

PRESENT JUSTICE PERSPECTIVES AND EFFORTS

The first research question asked how CRC people understand the term “justice,” and the ways in which they are presently engaged in “doing justice.” This research question was addressed by the document review. It also generated by far the greatest amount of information in the key informant and focus group interviews. The responses are divided into three sub-sections: 1) how the CRC says it formally understands justice, 2) how CRC people “on-the-ground” understand justice, and 3) how CRC people live out and do works of justice.

Formal Denominational Understandings of Justice

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. The meaning of justice and pursuing justice is further explained in various CRC documents that were reviewed. Below are some key understandings of justice from these documents.

Restoration and renewal

Many of the documents articulate a strong theme involving the need to restore all of creation so that right relationships could prevail. For example, the CRC vision statement captures the ideals of renewal and restoration when it says that the good news of God’s kingdom “transforms lives and communities worldwide.” This vision statement provides a foundation for the understanding of “justice as transformative action” found in other CRC documents.

- The report to Synod 2005 on restorative justice indicates that there are ways of relating to others that bring about God’s “glorious justice.” In response to God’s call, Christians are to pursue the justice work of righting relationships.
- The Christian Reformed philosopher/theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff links social justice to the concept of “shalom” – of restoring God’s original intention for the world. Wolterstorff describes shalom as a state that encompasses and goes beyond justice, but requires justice in order to come about. This language is mirrored in CRC documents from the Office of Social Justice and in reports to Synod.

“When we talk about social justice, we mean God's original intention for human society: a world where basic needs are met, people flourish, and peace (shalom) reigns. God calls us, the church, to participate in the renewal of society so that all - especially the weak and vulnerable - can enjoy God's good gifts... But this also involves identifying the root causes of what keeps people poor, hungry, and powerless. The vast web of structural factors that perpetuates these social injustices cannot be overcome without broad systemic reform, and so we witness and work to remove these barriers.”

**Christian Reformed Church
Office of Social Justice**

“We believe:

that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people

that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged

that God calls the church to follow him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry...”

Belhar Confession

- The contemporary testimony of the CRC, *Our World Belongs to God* affirms that restoration requires action: “The Spirit calls all members to embrace God’s mission in their neighborhoods and in the world: to feed the hungry, bring water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and free the prisoner.” The testimony also affirms that God will use our skills “for the unfolding and well-being of his world so that creation and all who live in it may flourish.”

Undoing systemic barriers

Other documents clarified what justice work – including restoration and renewal – looks like in practice. These documents frequently mention that justice work focuses on dismantling the systemic barriers that lead to injustice and brokenness. Pursuing justice is therefore not simply a matter of responding to individual need, but of helping to create conditions in which people and creation flourish.

- Diaconal Ministries acknowledges that justice work inevitably requires that we “seek to change those societal root causes in such a way that the individual is again able to live out his or her God-given calling within a community.”
- The *Belhar Confession*, adopted as an Ecumenical Faith Declaration at Synod 2012, was written in response to Reformed church support of systemic apartheid in South Africa. The confession affirms the church’s role in pursuing God’s justice (see side bar) and speaks out against structures of disunity and injustice: “The church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”
- *Our World Belongs to God* and documents from both the Centre for Public Dialogue and the Office of Social Justice recognize the role of government in doing justice and addressing systemic injustice. “We call on all governments to do public justice...to work for peace and to restore just relationships,” says *Our World Belongs to God* (paragraphs 53 & 54). The Centre for Public Dialogue notes that this is a continual call requiring “ongoing public dialogue about justice” with government and its citizens.
- Public dialogue creates an environment of awareness which in turn can motivate individuals to advocate for systemic justice. The book *Living Justice: A Gospel Response to Poverty* (which includes reformed perspectives) views advocacy as a stepping-stone for both personal and systemic transformation. The Office of Social Justice directs Christians to advocate for systemic reform through both prayer and political advocacy.

Responding to people beyond charity

Some CRC documents made a point of distinguishing between doing works of charity and works of justice. For example:

- The Office of Social Justice contrasts charity with justice by noting that charity does not consider structural “root causes” of problems. It goes on to say that charity is often concerned with the provision of goods and services where control remains solely in the provider’s hands.
- In the book *Living Justice: A Gospel Response to Poverty*, Citizens for Public Justice points out the separation of giver and receiver in acts of charity, where the giver maintains their superior position. In contrast, justice work serves others “with a posture of humility.”
- In World Renew strategic planning documents, there is a perspective that authentic mercy requires justice. World Renew considers justice and mercy to be inseparable for achieving the shalom that God intended for all relationships between people and God, their neighbours and creation. In light of this, World Renew notes their commitment to the value of Biblical Justice: “Everyone is an imagebearer of God. We abhor injustice, so we strive to uphold the dignity and worth of all, upholding the rights of all persons and their communities along with the personal gifts and natural resources God has given them. World Renew seeks to understand and address the structural root causes of poverty, including unjust power relationships based on gender, ethnicity, and religion. We engage our constituency in dialogue on these issues and encourage them to advocate accordingly.”

Being responsive to Biblical authority

Much of the rationale for pursuing justice was Biblically-based. CRC documents not only made reference to specific Scripture passages, but also commented on how pursuing justice is consistent with the broader Biblical narrative. The 2005 report to Synod on restorative justice acknowledged that the righting of relationships with every part of creation “is *the* great theme of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.” The *Belhar Confession* states that ultimately God wishes to bring about justice for all of creation. Diaconal Ministries, *The Little Book of Biblical Justice*, and the *Belhar Confession* all stress the Biblical theme of God liberating the oppressed.

A matter of all life and faith

A final theme in CRC documents related to the centrality of pursuing justice in Christian life. Documents stressed that, for Christians, justice is intimately related to personal faith. For example, an article in the *Reformed Worship* magazine titled “Just Worship” stated that, “doing justice is a condition of authentic worship” and that worship is required for rooting justice work. Worship is not for leaving one’s secular life behind but instead, “worship is for presenting one’s life to God—one’s life outside the assemblies and one’s life inside the assemblies.”

“If we avoid the issue of structural change, Christians would consign themselves to fighting the symptoms of poverty and hunger instead of getting at the disease itself. While the church is unable to provide relief to the hungry masses of the world, it can certainly advocate for systemic reforms that would significantly improve the lot of millions in poverty. Moreover, if the church would avoid calling for changes to unjust structures, then it would be guilty of proclaiming a truncated gospel. A message that fails to proclaim our radical liberation through Jesus Christ from every configuration of sin greatly limits the stature of our Deliverer.”

**For My Neighbor's Good,
Synod 1979**

On-the-ground Understandings of Justice

Unlike the formal CRC understandings of justice, which were relatively consistent across documents, the on-the-ground congregant understandings of justice were wide-ranging. The interviews revealed divergent opinions about what justice means. Most notable were the continuums of understanding justice as “restoration and renewal” versus “retribution and judgment,” and “undoing systemic barriers” versus “alleviating individual need.”

It became clear in the interviews and focus groups that these continuums framed much of the popular understandings of justice, with most individuals found somewhere between these polar positions.

In general, key informant understandings closely reflected the formal understandings of justice, particularly among those who reported the most justice activity. However, many key informants mentioned that the “typical” CRC congregant would not necessarily share their views. This view was generally confirmed through the focus groups.

Below we highlight the diversity of understandings across key themes. It is important to note that these include participants’ reports of their own understandings of justice, and also their perceptions of others’ understanding.

Justice in relation to... Biblical teaching

The overwhelming majority of participants identified God’s justice as a prevalent theme throughout both the Old and the New Testaments. As one focus group participant stated, “Justice is God’s expectation for life in the world.” Many of the research participants acknowledged that there is “a lot of Biblical precedent” for the inclusion of justice as a central aspect to Christian faith. One key informant described the gospel as being “loaded” with examples of justice. Passages such as Micah 6:8 or the Sermon on the Mount were cited as examples of passages in which Christians are explicitly commanded to embody justice. Other references included passages where justice is shown through action or teaching, such as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the stories of the prophets Amos and Micah, or the story of Tabitha in Acts.

Throughout all of the interviews, a keen desire to maintain the centrality of Biblical teachings was obvious. The Bible was seen to be the definitive guide for Christian living, and this grounded and legitimized perspectives on justice and the role of justice in Christian life.

“[Justice is] the whole story of the Bible, the narrative is telling the story of God reaching out to his people – he wants to correct that relationship that once was pure but now has been tarnished because of human behaviour. The very fact that Jesus enters into creation is an act of justice.... He models what relationships are supposed to look like within the church and outside of the church after he leaves.” (Focus Group Participant)

“In terms of how CRC people understand what justice means, I’m guessing that a lot of them try to understand it from a Biblical perspective and I think that is a strength of a reformed background, that we do try to approach these kinds of things, no matter how difficult they are, from a Biblical perspective.” (Key informant)

“You can’t separate justice from the Bible because true justice comes when God’s kingdom is more manifest.” (Focus Group Participant)

“...the understanding of the gospel, it’s first and foremost. It’s not...[an individual’s] opinion on issues, but ‘this is what the Bible teaches and this is what the Lord wants us to do.’ We may take different approaches to go about it, but this is an issue we have to address.” (Key informant)

“I’m pretty convinced that justice is actually central to the gospel.” (Focus Group Participant)

In addition, research participants often acknowledged Biblical authority when articulating their own views of justice.

“The [Biblical] worldview that says every square inch belongs to God. There is a reason to care about creation because creation itself is being redeemed.” (Key informant)

“When you’re working at making more dense the network of relationships that lead to a more fuller, happier, more productive life, that is actually what the Bible understands by justice” (Key informant)

“I think CRCers could benefit from seeing justice in a more systemic way. From hearing some sermons on the places in the Bible where God calls us to justice and it’s not a pick-up those who have fallen kind of thing, it’s really...a more systematic view of justice is woven through the scripture.” (Key informant)

Justice in relation to... restoration and retribution

A dominant theme concerning the understanding of justice related to what people saw as the outcome of justice work. As mentioned above, some CRC members considered the fruit of justice to be, “restoration and renewal,” while others saw “retribution and right judgment” as its outcome. Those leaning toward a restorative perspective emphasized restored relationships as central to the fulfillment of justice. Restoring right relationships was seen to be necessary in all aspects of life, most notably between people, but also extending to other parts of creation. Those who understood justice as retributive emphasized that wrongs must be judged, with the outcome being unavoidable punishment.

The restorative view came forward as the perspective that resonated with most key informants and focus group participants. In fact, justice as restoration of relationships was one of the strongest themes heard – so much so that it was often intertwined with the other themes identified below.

“One of my observations...is to do justice, it’s not simply about right or wrong, but it’s about relationship.” (Key informant)

“[When I think of justice] for me what comes to mind is right relationships, which I think is associated with definitions of shalom.” (Focus Group Participant)

“It’s about access, about welcoming, about hospitality, about inclusion, about shared power, and being aware of privilege.” (Key informant)

Many key informants thought that “typical” CRC members had less of a restorative understanding of justice and more of a retributive perspective. This perspective was observed in some focus groups where participants focused on “fairness” and the idea of “letting justice be served.” It focused on vengeance and judgment in making things right.

“There are many people for whom justice really means vengeance or retribution or more criminal justice.” (Key informant)

“One of the things that I think inhibits the CRC from embracing justice more vigorously...is that we have this idea that justice is retributive.” (Key informant)

“Justice is right or wrong.” (Focus Group Participant)

“When there is something that is wrong, part of correcting it is actually punishment and God does that time and time again.” (Focus Group Participant)

Justice in relation to... systems

In addition to describing the outcomes of justice work, research participants spoke about the process of doing justice—what it means to pursue justice. For many key informants, justice work was understood to mean changing socio-economic and political systems. Many of society’s structures were seen to be unjust when they protect the privilege of some at the expense of others. Just as interpersonal relationships need to be renewed, so too do society’s systems. In the words of one key informant, there is a “wider web of [structural] relationships that has to be restored.”

For these participants, justice meant holding these systems accountable: critiquing systems to expose injustice; protecting the vulnerable when necessary; changing personal lifestyles when our actions perpetuate the injustice, even at the expense of our own privilege.

“[Justice] for me would include...exposing the cycles of violence in patterns of systemic realities of injustice.” (Key informant)

“The world systems are biased against the poor from the get-go, because the systems are built so that those in power can abuse it. And so those in power have a lot more power than those who are vulnerable. Critiques... at that level would not be present in the CRC. Things that critique our privilege really.” (Key informant)

“I think if we did [look for root causes], and probably why we’re scared to or avoid it is because we see how we’re a part of the injustices as well. I think we don’t want to go there.” (Focus Group Participant)

Many research participants felt that the “typical” CRC congregant would not necessarily share this view of injustice as a systemic problem. Instead, CRC people were perceived to generally believe that society’s systems were essentially good. What is more, viewing justice systemically would cause people to think that the issues are too complex to know how to adequately address.

“At the level of systemic issues, I think [CRC people] would see people as having fallen through the cracks of a basically good system. I don’t think they would see it as those who are in power and those who are in privilege, which includes ourselves, systematically excluding the oppressed and the vulnerable.” (Key informant)

“In part because evil ends up being systemic and then injustice ends up being systemic and sometimes it becomes very difficult to do anything about it.” (Key informant)

“[About justice]...immediately it jumps to: you have to deal with these big government or political or systemic kind of things, and how do I do that?” (Key informant)

“What about the root causes that are contributing to the fact that we can’t get access to education, that we have chronic underemployment, let alone unemployment in this country? The church is not systematically responding to those sorts of things. That would make a lot of people uncomfortable if we were to do that.” (Focus Group Participant)

Finally, some participants acknowledged the limitations of framing justice only as a systemic issue. If understandings of justice remain hands-off and distant, if there are no personal relationships that accompany justice work, then the true intent of God’s justice is not being fulfilled.

“Then there are people who know that organizations like CPJ [Citizens for Public Justice] and AJS [Association for a More Just Society] and CPD [Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue] exist; [these people] are interested in justice issues. But then [CRC people] equate [justice] with policy issues, as if justice was just about getting the right policies in place.” (Key informant)

“In some circles justice is really political advocacy. And that’s one dimension, but that leaves a lot of people out.” (Key informant)

“Some people who do justice forget about walking backwards to compassion, they only want to advocate for the rights but not to do the compassionate walk with.” (Key informant)

Justice in relation to... charity, mercy, and compassion

Some participants observed that the CRC constituency viewed justice as being distinct from charity (or mercy and compassion). Others were seen to view these as synonymous. In fact, participants considered it more common that these concepts were muddled into a single category. One focus group participant illustrated this point, saying justice and mercy were “two sides of the same coin.” Several research participants identified this understanding as problematic.

“I suspect that the majority of Canadian CRC people confuse justice and charity work – they don’t see much of a distinction between those two.” (Key informant)

“We often identify helping as being social justice and then we often miss what the root [problem] is.” (Focus Group Participant)

“Many people will understand compassion or mercy as doing God’s justice” (Key informant)

“Charity for me is close to mercy, and so is justice.” (Focus Group Participant)

When participants made a distinction, many viewed charity and justice along a continuum: charity was perceived to focus on fulfilling immediate need, and justice was understood to go beyond observable symptoms to find the root causes of that need. Most key informants identified the charity model of responding to individual need as the preferred model of a majority of CRC congregants. However, there was a perception that CRC understandings were shifting, “so it’s not just handouts all the time, but figuring out what is the cause of this and getting at the root of it...” Churches were even seen to be now wondering “how do you move from charity to advocacy and to empowering instead of enabling?”

“There are a lot of [CRC people] talking about compassion for the poor people, about various kinds of ways that the church can respond to the poor. As soon as I talk about taking it to the next level, eyes tend to glaze over.” (Key Informant)

“[There’s a] very strong legacy of service in the [CRC] community...service hasn’t always made the transition from service to justice – service has a wonderful potential to be about justice, but some critical paradigm shifts have to be made.” (Key informant)

“...there’s also another step that you’re missing in this thinking that ‘yes, you can teach somebody how to fish, but if they have no access to the pond or the lake, they are still going to starve.’ So who owns the lake? How do you get access to the lake? Who has the right to fish in the lake? Those to me are more to the other end of the continuum, the extreme justice end. Giving the fish is at the extreme end of charity, and teaching them how to fish is middle ground. Most CRC people...have only thought to this middle part.” (Key informant)

While most participants spoke of the distinction between justice and charity in terms of a continuum, some considered them to be different, but compatible.

“I wonder if we’re talking about different faces of love and...that’s causing some confusion. Loving our neighbour is one face of [love], justice I think is another face of love; I think it’s in its own category. I’ll suggest that I don’t think gifts... or talking to a neighbour or befriending a seeker that comes into church [are justice], I think those are different faces of love.... I think it is helpful to actually start to identify and define [justice] as something different – it comes out of love and out of the fact that we are a follower of Christ.” (Focus Group Participant)

Justice in relation to... Christian living

The final theme concerning on-the-ground understandings of justice related to how central the pursuit of justice was perceived to be in Christian faith and life. Participants’ responses could be categorized into three main groupings: those that felt justice is a central concern of Christian faith and life; those who viewed it is a secondary concern; and those who felt justice is a peripheral concern for Christians.

Research participants felt that a small portion of CRC people view justice as a first tier concern, where doing justice is essential to daily Christian living.

“I think it’s quite evident that Jesus meant love your neighbour to be a first tier concern. What is Christianity? Love God, love your neighbour. And so if we were to take that seriously I would imagine that justice issues would be everything that we’re about.” (Key informant)

“And if [Jesus is] asking us to be followers of him, that is enough to prove that we are to be entering into justice. If the definition is trying to restore right relationships, then ... it’s a call for every Christian.” (Focus Group Participant)

“The mission of God is the notion of personal renewal and worship, discipleship and evangelism, and justice and advocacy dimensions. All three need to be woven together in a shared mission of God. At our best we are those three strands in our community.” (Key informant)

“Discipleship, that’s... what should be leading us to a daily exercise to show the face of love that is justice. It’s about discipling each other into the full life of Jesus Christ, the full exercise of what Jesus is calling us to do, which certainly is a central piece to what the call to justice is.” (Focus Group Participant)

“Justice should be in the first place.... If we forget about justice then all [other acts] are not meaningful.” (Focus Group Participant)

There was general consensus that the majority of CRC people would understand justice to be a second tier concern. One key informant described most CRC congregants as “not [having] a personal engagement in [justice].” Nonetheless, participants noted that justice was still selectively integrated into Christian living for people of this disposition, with other aspects of Christian living being prioritized over the pursuit of justice.

“Generally it tends to be more of a special cause thing, rather than a general thing. Special causes, special Sundays, the topic of justice gets highlighted... it’s not a seamless integration into your everyday fabric of the church.” (Key informant)

“I think that everybody knows that justice is an issue and that as a Christian we have to be aware of and incorporate it into our daily lives. But I don’t think it is necessarily being done with the care or enthusiasm it deserves.” (Key informant)

“It won’t make me closer [to God] or a better person if I do justice. That’s second in line for me.” (Focus Group Participant)

Research participants identified a third grouping of people, those who held that justice is unimportant to Christian living, which made up a very small percentage of congregants. One key informant explained that in regards to faith, “they don’t see [justice] as a connector.” Key informants suggested that those holding this peripheral view of justice feel that there should not be significant attention or resources allotted towards justice concerns. This perspective was illustrated by the comments of several focus group participants:

“Justice is not a Christian thing *per se*. It’s not a core tenet of needing to be Christian. Yes, as a Christian you should be just, but it’s not a core tenet of faith, of our salvation, that you need to be just in order to be saved.” (Focus Group Participant)

“If [justice was central] then don’t you think it would have been part of our ten commandments? Or explicitly stated?” (Focus Group Participant)

“You can get to justice through God, but you can’t get to God through justice.” (Focus Group Participant)

This diversity in understandings of how central justice is to Christian living provides valuable insight into the variation in how CRC people were perceived to be doing justice. It is to this working out of justice that we turn next.

How Justice Work is Being Done

Key informants and focus group participants described a spectrum of justice activity within the CRC. This spectrum mirrored 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. Justice work also ranged in terms of its scope, whether at a denominational level (which tended to be more national and international in scope) and at the local community level. These themes are explored in more detail below.

Responding to the needs of individuals

The bulk of activity noted by research participants focused on providing direct assistance and aid to people in need. For example, there were numerous comments

about how church members were active in a variety of settings, supporting “the marginalized” or “the disadvantaged.” These settings included soup kitchens, women’s shelters, refugee centres, drop-in centres, meal distribution services, Native healing centres, substance use supports, homeless supports, helping newcomers learn English, computer training, and more. Participating in short-term mission or disaster response trips, sponsoring refugees, and adopting international orphans were international extensions of this type of response to perceived need. In the words of one key informant, “That’s one of those characteristics of how we in the CRC do justice – is listening to that need and responding either financially or going out to help and be the hands and feet of Christ.”

Some participants questioned whether actions that addressed immediate need were actually reflective of justice work. “So I’m trying to determine,” said one key informant, “is this charity or is this justice? That’s the thing I’m trying to figure out here.” Some reasoned that if people were responding to immediate needs, they would be confronted with the broader issues of justice.

“People will go there and [say,] ‘Oh yeah, those are disadvantaged people,’ so they’ll start to explore justice there in that context.” (Key Informant)

“So people will go there [Honduras] and will simply see issues of justice or injustice and [say], ‘Oh we should work harder at that.’” (Key Informant)

Still others made a clear distinction between charitable relief and justice work:

“I think it’s pretty common in churches that we get ‘doing aid’ and ‘doing justice’ confused.... They’re more likely to go for the ‘aid thing’ than to go for the ‘justice thing.’” (Key Informant)

“It tends to [be]...charity and justice as a continuum. And [CRC people] would lean more towards the charity side, rather than the social justice side.” (Key Informant)

“If I asked them, how do you do justice, they would probably say, I give to the poor and I help out with the food bank...and I help refugee families settle down, which for me would be far more examples of the charity end of the continuum and very, very little on the justice end of the continuum.” (Key Informant)

“While the denomination does great work on trying to help us think of justice holistically, on the ground it gets mixed up.” (Key Informant)

This charity—justice tension played itself out within conversations about diaconal work. A number of research participants acknowledged the work of deacons as a formalized response of congregations to people in need. Again, whether this work could be classified as doing justice was open for debate. Some saw diaconal work as primarily charitable benevolence and not in the realm of justice. Others saw that diaconal work could reflect justice, including equipping other church members to pursue justice. However, the challenges of such efforts were acknowledged:

“And then you’ve got other deacons that really get it, but don’t know where to start because they work full time and they have young children.... They understand the concept of social justice, but mobilizing a church and really engaging in this stuff, [being a deacon is] not a full time job, it’s a part time job. So having people do it off the side of their desks is really challenging.” (Key Informant)

Although the formal work of deacons was acknowledged, key informants felt that responding to people in need was not usually delegated to deacons by the congregation. Rather, participants were of the perspective that church members respond to people’s needs directly, often working through a para-church or other non-profit organization. Sometimes the local congregation had a relationship with these organizations and invited church members to get involved in the organization’s activities. In other cases the connection was made by the individual church member.

Participants reported that some of these types of activities were sustained, with church members being regular participants and building relationships over time. Other activity was more spontaneous or organized as one-time events. These one-time responses were less likely to be considered justice work by participants.

“You know, I think holding a dinner for homeless people is a wonderful thing – that’s really nice and puts a lot of people out of their comfort zone. But I don’t think holding a dinner for homeless people is social justice. So people are doing lots of one-off projects as well.” (Key Informant)

Getting to the root of the problem

A second category of justice work being done was more systemic in nature. Participants reported that CRC people were involved in efforts that were more “prevention-focused,” and that tried to address the “root causes” of why people were in a position of need. However, these types of efforts were seen to be less common, especially among local congregations. This opinion was consistent with the findings of a survey of CRC congregations conducted for the Office of Deacon Task Force, which found that CRC members were much more likely to see their church doing well in acts of charity and benevolence than in addressing systemic justice issues (CRCNA, 2011).

Several focus group members acknowledged that justice work is something that CRC people are called to, but expressed confusion about the depth to which the church and CRC people should pursue it.

“I guess the question that I’m left with is what’s the difference between having this church reach out to your community...and seeking justice? Is that part of seeking justice or is seeking justice more?” (Focus Group Participant)

“I guess I feel like things can be more intentional.... Okay this is the baseline of being community together, but as a community what does seeking justice look like?” (Focus Group Participant)

“... we’re becoming friends [with people in our community], but is becoming friends seeking justice? ... I think we like to seek justice and so in becoming friends with a person, check, we sought justice. But... are we just trying to take the easy route?” (Focus Group Participant)

Political advocacy was identified as one expression of systemic justice work. However, research participants had mixed views about CRC involvement in political advocacy. On the one hand, participants acknowledged the important work of CRC agencies such as the Office of Social Justice, Centre for Public Dialogue, and World Renew, and related organizations like Citizens for Public Justice, in advocating to government and other power-holders about needed change in public policy and law. On the other hand, we heard that despite these examples of political advocacy, CRC congregations generally expressed caution, even resistance, to being politically active.

When discussing the importance of work done by CRC agencies, participants praised their often far-reaching efforts, which included: Aboriginal issues, LGBTQ issues, criminal justice, immigrant and refugee issues, economic justice (e.g. business and investment practices), and corporate social responsibility. This type of political advocacy was typically described as denominational work—carried out by denominational staff, sometimes in collaboration with other Christian partners.

“[At the denominational level] I’m thinking of initiatives that come out of the CRC head office, or the [Office of Social Justice], or [Centre for Public Dialogue]. Those initiatives at that level are often very good and tend to work a lot on policy issues, systemic issues, things that really delve into Canadian society, like the Aboriginal issues... a lot of good work going on and often in collaboration with other ecumenical Christian organizations in Canada.” (Key Informant)

Some local congregations were considered to have “jumped on board” and supported denominational leadership in political advocacy efforts. One focus group participant described advocating as a “powerful witness to the oppressed and to the government.” Other congregations were considered to be responding to the political advocacy of other Christian bodies (e.g., Kairos), and active with other social movements (e.g., anti-abortion, anti-poverty, refugee rights).

“There are congregations out there that are very engaged in social justice and they are talking to politicians and working to change some of the laws, specifically about immigration policies and supports for refugees. There are congregations out there who are very knowledgeable about what the policies are and they are constantly in dialogue with members of Parliament. They’re trying to mobilize the broader community to engage and understand what the issues are. They’re also trying to work at the grassroots level and help the people that they perceive as being wronged by these systemic issues.” (Key informant)

Despite examples of such enthusiasm for justice, there was a perception that people were reluctant to respond to the difficult, time-consuming, and often complex work

required for effective political advocacy. In addition, political advocacy was perceived by some as threatening their own privilege and comfort.

“I think because people feel inadequate to deal with those things [policy issues], it can take a lot of time. It’s time consuming, and it can be frustrating because you’re dealing not just with an individual person, but you’re dealing with institutions as well.” (Key Informant)

“In terms of helping the government addressing issues of justice, I think our people are nowhere near that.” (Key Informant)

“I honestly can’t change how the law applies justice. I don’t think I can as an individual because there’s a huge difference between the law and what we describe as justice.” (Focus Group Participant)

“I think the wariness comes whenever the issue is political... for instance with this Idle No More movement, [there is] a real hesitancy to say anything about it because ‘oh well we shouldn’t get political in the church....’ Like yeah, we should make sure kids know how to read, but what do we do about the structural injustices inherent in the Canadian system against the Aboriginal people?... It’s so close, it’s so present that I think that there’s a real worry.” (Key Informant)

Supporting community development was a second frequently discussed expression of systemic justice work. One key informant described these efforts as “teaching people how to fish,” as distinct from “ensuring people have access to the fishing pond” (political advocacy), or “giving people fish to eat” (charitable relief/aid). The work of World Renew (and to a lesser extent World Missions) was a common way that people thought that this type of justice work was being done by the CRC, in that it is supported financially by churches, and provides opportunities for CRC people to become engaged in short or long-term development efforts worldwide.

“Well in Canada I think many people connect justice with World Renew, and either the justice work or the development work [that they do].” (Key Informant)

Participants also discussed community development initiatives conducted by CRC people via parachurch or other non-profit organizations in their own communities. These efforts were often small, grassroots enterprises, such as helping with community gardens, establishing supportive neighbourhood hubs in low-income zones, and general local involvement. Others supported international community economic development locally by bringing fair trade coffee into their church.

“We often talk about justice as political advocacy, as if that’s the only way that you can do justice - you become involved politically. I think that’s not quite right. Whenever you’re involved in helping people to heal their relationships, and when you’re working at integrating people into a stronger more supportive community, that also [is justice work].” (Key Informant)

Consciousness-raising was a third expression of systemic justice work. Preparing people to do acts of justice by helping them to understand issues of justice was in itself considered justice work. The CRC denomination was acknowledged as doing this to some extent, albeit not enough in the opinion of many participants. Consciousness-raising activities focused on highlighting the systemic nature of justice – something not always obvious or intuitive to people, yet needed in order to make sure that people were being helpful and not harmful when trying to help others. Providing educational materials and resources, and holding workshops and conferences on justice issues were concrete expressions of this type of justice work. Several participants mentioned that this pilot research project had already played a consciousness-raising role within their CRC circle.

“There’s lots of organizations, CPJ and others, there’s lots of material, some from the CRC, some not, very user-friendly material that you can use to do in small groups and get people understanding about [justice] and giving people the opportunity to do something with what they’ve learned.” (Key Informant)

“Even the fact that we’re having this discussion here today is a good sign that people are wrestling with [justice] and people are thinking about it and there is obviously a culture shift necessary to implement some of these things, but having this conversation is a great start.” (Focus Group Participant)

A posture in life

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. As discussed above, this was regarded as a small portion of the CRC constituency, despite the CRC mission statement explaining that “we pursue God’s justice and peace in every area of life.”

“I think CRC people have a particular attunement to understanding their vocations and their day to day choices and all aspects of their life as being tied to their discipleship... At times that’s linked to how that might impact others in our community. I think CRC people are concerned at large with the well-being of their neighbourhoods.... We live a holistic faith in that regard.” (Key Informant)

“As Christians we should live [justice].” (Focus Group Participant)

“[Justice] becomes a part of who you are.” (Focus Group Participant)

“I would hope that in their own spheres of life that they are doing justice even by nature of being practicing Christians and having this high view of justice. So that let’s say in our workplace or in our homes, that we wouldn’t necessarily even know that we’re doing justice, but where there is injustice we would do something about it.... I’m hoping that as Christians we would speak into those kinds of situations.” (Key Informant)

ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO DOING JUSTICE

The second research question related to what is enabling and what is preventing CRC people from pursuing justice. Research findings related to enablers are described first, followed by those describing barriers.

Enablers to Pursuing Justice

Key informants and focus group participants identified several pathways that encouraged people to pursue justice. These pathways included casting a Biblical vision of justice; personal experiences with individuals who have experienced injustice; justice engagement leadership from individuals and agencies; and community involvement in justice issues. These themes are explored below.

A Biblical vision of justice is cast

One of the more common themes that arose was the importance of casting a vision of justice that is Biblical. Interviewees felt that when the reasons for pursuing justice were connected to what it means to follow God's call as a Christian, people would be more likely to respond to justice issues. Participants felt that this vision has been cast to various extents, at the congregational, classis, and denominational levels. Those who mentioned this vision-casting as an enabler were implicitly affirming the formal and Scripturally-informed denominational understandings of justice (described above), and the denominational efforts to promote them.

"The CRC likes to talk about the reformed worldview and that would enable [CRC people].... They intrinsically understand that the justice thing is connected to the whole worldview thing, the Lordship of Christ." (Key Informant)

"The reformed tradition has a lot to offer [for justice] – it involves body and soul and our whole world belongs to God." (Focus Group Participant)

Research participants discussed a number of helpful ways that this type of vision casting is being done, both formally and informally. For example, a Biblically-based view of justice was frequently expressed through sermons, through the creation of justice focused CRC programs, and through written materials that encourage denominational dialogue.

"Some churches will have sermons on it and a lot of emphasis on what God's mission is and that justice is part of that." (Key Informant)

"Articles [that] dare to make explicit some of the things that we disagree on, but do it in a way that promotes dialogue, those are really powerful and can get people thinking about justice in a safe space." (Key Informant)

"A great place to start is just being in community and having a group that you can be discerning with and reading through the Scriptures together and being able to think and pray through how to respond. You can't do it alone. You probably shouldn't either." (Focus Group Participant)

Identifying through personal experience

Personal experience was also identified as an enabler for engaging in justice work. Research participants frequently mentioned that confronting situations of injustice, whether experienced by church members or by others in the community, was an important mobilizer for their involvement in justice issues. They identified this experiential knowledge as a “crucial” step toward enabling CRC people to pursue justice because it “brings it home.”

Some of the experiences listed by interviewees were more general (for example, learning about poverty or racial stigmatization in the community), while others were specific (for example, a person’s or family’s experience). Whether general or specific, sharing in these stories of injustice motivated people to act.

“To be able to hear of some of the experiences, personal reflection, and testimony of people that have served, then these marginal people want to take the next step and say this is important, I want to follow God’s leading in the justice picture. I think that’s a big one.” (Key Informant)

“And the churches – opening their doors to the needs of the community. Allow the deacons to share with the congregation about the need... not to breach confidentiality but to share some of the stories about the needs of the community and helping the congregations understand what they’re giving towards – that’s crucial.” (Key Informant)

In some cases, the church has been a catalyst for opening dialogue and breaking down barriers between marginalized groups and CRC people. For instance, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) National Event held in Saskatoon provided opportunities to hear stories and connect with Aboriginal families that had survived residential schooling. This event enabled numerous CRC people to become more aware of past injustices, and become more involved in their community:

“They don’t know about the history of residential schools ... And then to believe it and to take seriously the testimony of Aboriginal people ... there were thousands of people that came out [to the TRC event] and they did such simple things...like bake birthday cakes for kids who had been in residential school who had never had a birthday celebrated.” (Key Informant)

Leadership that promotes justice

Another enabler was the role of leadership in directing CRC people’s actions toward justice. Research participants recognized the role of both individual and organizational leaders in creating momentum for faith-based justice initiatives, and for bringing the concept of justice to the foreground.

Interviewees named several organizations, both CRC agencies and others, that have taken on the role of promoting justice. These organizations included World Renew, Citizens for Public Justice, Centre for Public Dialogue, Office of Social Justice, Acquire the Fire, Youth Unlimited, Compassion Canada, and World Vision. Participants also

mentioned that justice leadership for youth is present at post-secondary institutions. In the words of one focus group participant, these organizations were enablers because, “the framework [for justice] is there.”

“One family ended up becoming involved as foster parents because of a challenge from CPJ and you know, almost right away after that came this opportunity to be foster parents so they jumped in and did that.” (Key Informant)

“We’ve got other youth kind of related and Worship Renewal conferences that share the need for justice.... And so those kind of places are great places to share the need.” (Key Informant)

“So I think an enabler is information and stuff coming from those organizations, especially World Renew, there’s just a lot of respect for that organization.” (Key Informant)

Youth were the most frequently cited individual leaders. Participants suggested that CRC youth have facilitated change through their enthusiasm and their ability to connect justice to Christian life.

“The next generation, those under 35, get it and we just need to learn from them. Let the younger people lead a lot of the community-based initiatives that we’re looking to do. I think they will be able to intuitively teach us and lead us ... to do good work.” (Key Informant)

“There are little clusters there for example at Wilfrid Laurier and UWO where there are small groups of young adults that just want to be involved.” (Key Informant)

An important element identified by several participants was the level and type of involvement coming from both individuals and organizations. They explained that the most effective leaders are those that have the greatest involvement with justice issues. Participants accentuated this point by identifying styles of leadership and types of involvement, including multiple commitments to justice-based organizations, experience doing justice work, and a holistic understanding of justice.

“[They need to be] facilitators, not teachers, of experience. That person who leads things and facilitates people’s experience, rather than telling them what they’re supposed to experience.” (Key Informant)

“So that’s definitely an enabler... having people that talk about [justice], and having people that are interested in it, and having people that are actually doing justice stuff or are involved in justice organizations.... The more you know, the more personally involved you are, the more other people care.” (Key Informant)

Engagement from the community leads individuals to act

A final, lesser theme identified how an engaged community can motivate individuals to be more involved with justice issues. Several research participants explained that when an individual's community – their family, friends, and congregation – was engaged in justice work, the individual was also mobilized to justice work. Research participants mentioned that seeing commitment from those around them resonated with individuals and influenced them to “take the next step.” This theme differs from the other enablers mentioned above because it shows how passive factors can also motivate people to action.

“Just gathering people together to have conversations and to wrestle with and think deeply about this and to start to make some shifts deep down within people. And having support from like-minded individuals as you're doing what you're doing; having other people around you to help you with [justice] stuff.”
(Focus Group Participant)

Barriers to Pursuing Justice

Research participants identified a wide range of barriers that prevent CRC people from pursuing justice. Some barriers were at the individual level, while others were at the organizational level. Sometimes it was the lack of awareness about justice issues that was seen to be the primary barrier. At other times, however, CRC people were aware of justice issues but did not get involved for other reasons. These themes are explored below.

CRC people are aware of justice issues, but they are not a priority

A number of the research participants explained that despite having knowledge of justice issues, doing justice does not rank highly in the priorities of many CRC people. As one participant explained, “the biggest thing that gets in people's way is lack of interest. It's not their top priority; they're not really passionate about it.” Another explained that justice might be “a priority in our minds, but it is optional when it comes to doing anything.” One participant suggested that this was because congregants are “inward focused” and “navel-gazers,” so they do not look outside their own interests.

“We are not strongly motivated to seek justice. It has to be pointed out.”
(Focus Group Participant)

Some participants connected this perceived disinterest with limited exposure to justice issues. One participant explained that justice is “not a priority. The less exposure [CRC people] have, the less engagement they have.” Others saw that the lack of priority was more a function of not adequately explaining the theological basis for pursuing justice.

“If [justice isn’t] mentioned all that often it’s going to be harder for you to understand where justice comes in theologically. If it’s implicit rather than explicit, it’s going to be harder for you to think theologically about justice.” (Key Informant)

“But I think most folks, if you pressed them to ask how does [the connection between theology and justice] actually work, they would not be able to tell you. They understand that doing justice is part of the worldview thing, but it hasn’t been integrated very well.” (Key Informant)

People are sheltered from injustice and do not want to leave their comfort zones

Research participants spoke about how they have observed CRC people being sheltered from justice issues because of their distance from the individuals and communities that are most likely to encounter injustice. Participants agreed that not being in a minority made it easier not to seek justice. They suggested that the CRC needed to stop thinking about those experiencing injustice as “those people over there,” but instead as their “brothers and sisters.”

“In the [CRC] monoculture, it’s ‘we’re doing this for these people, we’re doing this for those people’. But when ‘these people’ are just as much a community as I am or you are, then it changes the way you function and the way you see your neighbour, and the way you interact with others outside your congregation as well. So being able to relate to people who are of various different backgrounds and economic situations and cultures changes a lot the way you interact with justice.” (Focus Group Participant)

“[We don’t seek justice because] it’s somebody else’s issue. It’s somebody else’s problem.” (Focus Group Participant)

“Another barrier is the ‘us-them’ belief. It’s a challenge for the church – in particular the CRC – they don’t know if they could trust those who are not Dutch.” (Focus Group Participant)

“A lot of people in North America are very comfortable and life is predictable. It’s uncomfortable to meet people different from you [because] you have to change.” (Focus Group Participant)

There were a number of reasons for this disconnect. Below is a list of the most commonly mentioned factors that were seen to insulate CRC people from confronting injustice.

The relative wealth enjoyed by many CRC people

“When we’re in a position of power, and I think our wealth puts us in that position, we just don’t see [injustice].” (Key Informant)

“There is a justifying of privilege and a sense of entitlement [among CRC people].” (Focus Group Participant)

“We’re a fairly nice middle class church, so...we’re not always a voice for justice because none of [the injustice is] in our church.” (Key Informant)

“[We are] wealthy people in a wealthy country.” (Focus Group Participant)

“How do we side with the poor when you don’t live poor? It’s hard to imagine the lifestyle.” (Key Informant)

“I think most CRC [people] are very middle or upper class, so we really don’t know the struggles that others have and we’re blinded to the way that our power affects some of those things.” (Key Informant)

“I think who we interact with comes from who we are, and I would imagine that most of us look like the other people in the pews with us...and I think it skews how we do justice and what we see.” (Focus Group Participant)

Busy lifestyles and the obligations that come with maintaining financial position

“Busy-ness and time. Well, folks live a very high speed life and a high pressure life and slowing down enough to fit something more in.” (Key Informant)

“There’s a preoccupation with double income families just being able to make it. ‘Making it’ prevents them from time management and they don’t have the time left over. (Key Informant)

“People being too busy and too overwhelmed in their lives to take [justice] on. Justice is not an easy solution, it’s usually long term and it’s difficult. It’s hard to get people to engage in something like that. People want to have something they can do that they can see tangible, immediate results and feel good.” (Key Informant)

Holding negative stereotypes and prejudicial assumptions

“In my experience especially when I talk about Indigenous issues, this can get negative responses from people who believe very different things.” (Key Informant)

“I’m thinking about the homosexuality issue as well. As long as it’s distant we can condemn everything and we’ve got it all figured out, until – I’ve seen it happen – one of our kids comes out of the closet and then it’s different. It changes.” (Key Informant)

Political viewpoints that create distance and divide

“For me justice is the government – it’s their responsibility.” (Focus Group Participant)

“I don’t know how to be more specific about the politicization of things, but that’s a real barrier. Sometimes it comes out as it’s too much, they don’t want to deal with it, but a lot of times it comes out as like well, [the government] will just handle it for us.” (Key Informant)

“People identify politically almost before they identify theologically...and then those positions just get some sort of theological rationalization.... [Theology] gets hijacked by our political affiliations.” (Key Informant)

“You get into the whole liberal-conservative divide really quickly and that can be really hard to navigate in the CRC because we do have a variety of political opinions, certainly in every congregation.” (Key Informant)

Inconsistent or confusing language

“The language that you use will be a direct reflection of what kind of things you think justice entails. In my experience, people who talk about missions and charity won’t necessarily think about justice in a systemic way, and so their actions in pursuing justice will look differently than somebody who would use the word justice and use it in a systemic way.” (Key Informant)

“I sometimes have a hunch that language gets in the way and a switch flips in their brains when they hear that and they think that it’s just all about policy or it’s this deeply systematic stuff that I can’t get my head around, so let’s just go back to what I understand which is the simpler work of doing justice.” (Key Informant)

“I wish there was a better word [for justice].” (Focus Group Participant)

Individual and organizational resistance to changing perspectives about justice

Research participants observed that CRC people and institutions were often reluctant to change their perspectives on justice. This resistance to pursuing justice was expressed as being both passive (i.e., through a lack of action), and active (i.e., purposeful resistance). Some of the most common areas of resistance that acted as barriers to pursuing justice are described below.

Limited education about justice issues was identified by participants as a primary barrier to action in the CRC. While they noted that some CRC agencies had emerged to address this barrier, they expressed concern that CRC people are generally still uneducated about justice issues and its relevance to the church.

“Well, education. I think that as people become more aware I think they’re more inclined to see justice as a necessary part of the Christian life and have the skills to pursue it.” (Key Informant)

“There’s a basic education issue I think. When the [Office of Social Justice] started they wanted to be a pure advocacy group, but they realized they couldn’t do advocacy because nobody knew what they were talking about. So they decided education needs to happen before advocacy can happen.” (Key Informant)

Building on these concerns, participants also noted that they had encountered active resistance to dialogue about justice from church members and pastors. For instance, they had often encountered dismissive attitudes toward justice from CRC people who viewed it as “not an integral part, it’s a bonus thing.”

“Thinking back to this other pastor friend of mine who said ‘these things are nice, but I don’t think this is what the church is supposed to be doing.’ ...For him, preaching the gospel is non-negotiable, it’s what a church is supposed to do. This [justice] stuff is nice, but is not a non-negotiable item.” (Key Informant)

At other times, participants recounted experiences where a lack of justice uptake by church leadership filtered down to negatively impact local initiatives. This type of resistance was often expressed as a lack of guidance or support in how to go about doing justice work, leaving CRC people without a sense of how to pursue justice.

“One of the things was lack of leadership for it, people trying to do [justice] within a congregation and the council or the pastor not supporting the work that they are doing. They continued at it for a while, but eventually they just ran out of steam; it was not sustainable.” (Key Informant)

“One of the things that came from someone who was involved in teaching a younger student, he mentioned that he’s hesitant to even talk about the issue of justice because he lacks that ‘What now?’ ‘Where do I go from here?’” (Key Informant)

Participants also described encountering negative reactions to pursuing justice that were theologically-based. Typically, this resistance was framed in such a way that positioned those who actively pursued justice as being spiritually weaker or distracted.

“There is the lingering perception of liberal mainline churches who are engaged in social justice, that their worship has become weak ... or even outright secular.” (Key Informant)

“The preventing part is back to the US and Canadian evangelical side...The individualistic ‘share the gospel’ is what we are supposed to do. And how does justice connect with that or how does it help that? Or does it hinder that because it takes the energies away or whatever?” (Key Informant)

The structure of the church creates barriers

A final theme that emerged related to structural barriers that exist within congregations or denominations. Again, these barriers were seen to be both active

(e.g., intentionally avoiding issues) or passive (e.g., poor inner-church communication).

At a general level, participants observed that the denomination lacked a consistent approach when addressing injustice, an inconsistency that was brought about by differing perspectives on justice and by differing strategies for achieving justice.

“Our churches, I don’t think that we’re structured very well for ministry in the CRC. We either think congregationally, and then every congregation has its own agenda, whether it’s church growth or whether they want to have neighbourhood groups. And when we think denominationally, then we think of the globe.” (Key Informant)

“I wonder if that actually... by giving [World Renew, Christian Reformed World Missions] money, by giving some time or nods to these structures that are already imbedded in the institution, that we’re saying ‘that’s it – we’re tapped out’. And so we’re not exploring new space [for justice] because you probably have to shave off something to create space to start moving in the direction of including something very intentional around justice.” (Focus Group Participant)

Research participants also noted a number of more specific structural barriers. For some, the barriers were at the congregational level:

"We have deacons who are on the ground discerning where the physical need is and administering the physical help. We’ve separated that out from having them involved governance wise, or even on a broader level of justice issues in Canada, which is the typical denominational approach.” (Key Informant)

“Congregations working in silos, not working together, but everybody trying to do their own thing, as opposed to working together and having more strength in that. It’s a narrow view of the Christian calling, what are we called to be and do as Christians.” (Key Informant)

“A church council not understanding what [people involved in justice are] doing and putting lots of roadblocks in the way of getting stuff done....That can be a barrier.” (Key Informant)

Some of the structural barriers were at a classis or denominational level:

“If you can permit me to critique the very fundamental structure of our denomination: we just finished a classis meeting and we spent Tuesday afternoon, evening and Wednesday morning with 70 people gathered together, and we did a lot of policy and procedure and follow the rules type of work...[but] in terms of inspiring our congregations towards loving mercy, doing justice, nothing happened on that level.” (Key Informant)

“That’s the CRC culture. We like to debate, and that’s kind of what they like to do. That’s a good thing, that’s a strength, but I think if that’s a strength we shouldn’t be doing it on our own. We should be doing it as a part of a larger context and not so singularly.” (Focus Group Participant)

“We hide ourselves in ecclesial structures that make us very disconnected and very cerebral.” (Key Informant)

FUTURE STRATEGIES TO MOBILIZE FOR JUSTICE

The third research question identified strategies to help CRC people understand and engage in doing justice. Several strategies emerged from the research, and are summarized below.

Develop a Clearer Biblical Vision of Justice

Research participants suggested that clearly connecting justice to the Bible would be a primary way to encourage all CRC congregants to be more justice-minded. Specifically, participants felt that justice should be articulated in a way that is firmly rooted within Biblical tradition, given that Biblical authority is fundamental to CRC identity.

“I think that there’s a need almost to define it, because justice is a word that is almost just thrown around – even, you know, ‘Let justice be served’. What does that mean? But I think it would be great to help the church have a clearer Biblical sense of ‘What does justice mean?’” (Focus Group Participant)

“Our [CRC] problem with wrestling with it is that we really haven’t defined what we mean by justice in the first place, although we do have a really good sense of what mercy is and what charity is.” (Focus Group Participant)

Key informants and focus group participants provided four central Biblical themes that they believed should be connected with a vision of justice.

Shalom

“Shalom is a concept we could build on and it’s in most CRC folks’ practices and vocabulary.... [We need] to say justice is connected to that and that shalom-making is part of justice.” (Key Informant)

“Our job is to create signposts of justice and shalom, we don’t have to create the highway.... It’s God that creates the justice, the reconciliation, the shalom and the healing.” (Key Informant)

Kingdom of God

“I think any existing justice work should be [communicated as] part of advancing the kingdom, so it’s something that’s not an add-on.” (Focus Group Participant)

“When it’s part of the kingdom of God, then you should be busy with social justice throughout.” (Focus Group Participant)

“His kingdom comes into earth as it is in heaven and for his glory’s sake. The kingdom and his name—that’s why justice is important.” (Focus Group Participant)

“[The CRC needs to establish] a network we could get involved with that we know is alive with Christian values, so that we’re not doing work for the sake of work, but are doing work to expand the kingdom of God.” (Key Informant)

Spiritual Disciplines

“I think for the CRC to become – in a more broadly based way, in this generation – participants in the pursuit of justice, it must be intrinsically linked to our worship and our experience of God in our spiritual journeys as individuals and communities.... I want to express my conviction that this must be part of our life and our worship, that’s the whole of life. That it must be intrinsically connected to our experiential side of our spiritual journeys so that we’re not just lost in our heads nor are we lost in our acts, that [we] would be deeply integrated people of God.” (Key Informant)

Missional Mindset

“...showing how [justice is] connected [with the great commission] in a meaningful way would help to empower and motivate CRC people.... I think the folks already intrinsically sense that justice is connected but don’t know how to articulate it.” (Key Informant)

“...we need a robust missional mindset in our churches, so not just about bringing people to Christ but the whole big picture.” (Key Informant)

“Go beyond saving souls; save people, save bodies.” (Focus Group Participant)

Create Places for Conversation

Research participants suggested that creating places where justice issues could be discussed, would be useful for mobilizing people for justice. Participants observed that continuous “dialogue and interaction” is needed because justice is not a simple topic to define or to live out. The CRC needs to be a “safe forum for welcoming dialogue,” said one key informant. Another talked about the need for “generous spaciousness,” particularly on issues that may be contentious.

“[We need to create] better opportunities to understand each other.” (Focus Group Participant)

“What I would like to see is, as a community...asking the question, ‘How are we involved in injustice?’ Asking those hard questions about our own lifestyles.... I haven’t seen that at a church level, and I’d love to see that at a church level. Those are hard questions to ask and they’re hard answers. I think if you did that within a community that would be a beautiful thing and it’s hard to do on your own.”(Focus Group Participant)

“I recognize that...from our context [as a small congregation], it’s easier to have conversations because we’re not a lot of people, because when you’ve got these huge congregations, how do you have conversations like this? How do you even begin? I would find that daunting. Maybe our congregations need to be smaller.” (Focus Group Participant)

The majority of participants indicated that there must be room for conversation and dialogue. However, some research participants also highlighted the importance of the CRC coming to consensus and collectively taking a stand on particular justice issues.

Raise Awareness within CRC Constituency

Research participants spoke about a need to more effectively raise awareness about matters of justice within the CRC constituency. In the words of one focus group participant, there was a need to “recapture people’s attention.” In particular, participants identified two distinct areas requiring attention.

The first was a need to provide information about the systemic realities of justice. One key informant identified this as “systemic wisdom,” which is necessary to understand more clearly the holistic nature of justice.

“[Justice is] really a systemic issue. We could stand to learn more about the prophets, that Israel was not just sent into exile because they worshipped idols, but ... that Israel was sent into exile because they were neglecting to care for the weak and the oppressed and in fact they were participating in the oppression.” (Key Informant)

The second was a need to clarify the definition of justice in general, and the distinction between justice and charity in particular. Research participants noted a great deal of confusion between these two terms and believed the CRC would benefit from their differentiation.

“How do you move from charity to advocacy and to empowering instead of enabling? ... I’m trying to determine, is this charity or is this justice, that’s the thing I’m trying to figure out there. I talked to one person who [has] been involved in lots of charity things, but he’s been pushing that people would see it as a bigger picture than just giving. He’s done studies of people of how do we move from this charity to justice. I think it’s something that a lot of churches wrestle with actually.” (Key Informant)

Promote Justice Leadership

Research participants identified leadership as crucial to successfully mobilize CRC people to pursue justice. In the words of one focus group participant, “I bet you the number one reason [justice is successful] is leadership. We just need higher quality leaders, period.” Pastors and deacons were identified as the most appropriate existing leaders who could be trained to mobilize people for justice within local congregations.

Another leadership theme that emerged was the need for local justice advocates or “champions.” Having a head office in Burlington that focused on justice was not seen to be sufficient. Rather, research participants envisioned local champions to be in each congregation. These would be people who, in the words of one key informant, “really believe deeply in the goals of the [Office of Social Justice, Centre for Public Dialogue, or others] and who are ready to talk about that with other congregational members.”

Once informed, congregants will often ask “What next?” These champions would be the people to help answer that question. Participants provided three reasons that adopting the World Renew model of champions would be helpful:

- Champions could **connect local congregations to resources**. The CRC has developed justice resources, but these were not seen to be reaching the average CRC congregant. One key informant explained, “The resources are there but we don’t talk about them enough, they aren’t as integrated into the life of congregations as they could be.” Champions would be knowledgeable about CRC resources, “[putting] the resources into people’s minds,” and also knowledgeable about other local community resources and connections.
- Champions could be a **continuous contact** on matters of justice. Research participants saw the importance of continually messaging justice issues within local congregations. Champions would be the “face-to-face relational piece” that would ensure that justice would not “get lost” amidst other congregational focuses.
- Champions could be **cultural interpreters**. Research participants noted that many issues of justice need a contextual framework in order to be understood; injustice does not happen in a vacuum, but because of specific cultural and contextual factors. Champions would be able to filter information through their local reality to ensure relevancy to CRC congregants.

Two groups of individuals were identified as having “high potential” to become champions: youth and women. Regarding youth, research participants suggested that opportunities for practical engagement were vital to further engage their emerging interest in justice work.

“Can the church provide more opportunities for young people that have that passion to in a very meaningful way get involved?” (Focus Group Participant)

“I do think that this generation that I have been experiencing, especially the last half a dozen years, more and more students really resonate with the larger systemic level problems, you know they’re not a slacker generation. They’re young people who care about the environment, they care about the marginalized, they care about poverty issues, they care about where our food comes from, and they’re thinking hard and doing that in a really creative way, so I’m kind of hopeful. It needs to be nurtured.” (Key Informant)

Regarding women, research participants suggested opportunities for leadership were critical to ensure the continued promotion of justice activities in the CRC.

“I think we need to further gender equality. ...it’s often really hard for [women] because if they’re a stay at home mom, then they’re looking forward to husband time, family time, dad and kids time, and then it’s like ‘Oh no, he’s got to eat and head off to a 3 hour council meeting and then he comes home’ and [the women have] just said, ‘Why didn’t we get asked? We would have loved to even just get out of the house!’ But then how much more could we be engaged in the work of the church if it wasn’t just this separate husbands looking after it all...to have the leadership of this church reflect its population.” (Focus Group Participant)

“There is a generation, I think – that would be the women who are over 50 – ...[who] have a pretty deep and rich and wide sense of what justice means. They are high potential: grandmothers of justice.” (Key Informant)

Create Opportunities to Confront Injustice

According to research participants, one of the most effective ways to increase justice work in the CRC is to create opportunities to confront the realities of those that have experienced injustice. As one key informant explained, “it takes personal relationships and personal experiences to really get [people] involved.” A personal relationship has the power to “shift” perspectives and priorities. Participants observed that these relationships need to be both “within the congregation and outside the congregation.”

Advocating for justice within congregations was seen to be important, but not at the expense of encouraging people to go “out into the world and [love] the world.” In particular, research participants recognized the importance of allowing time and space for justice narratives to emerge. This included both individual stories of injustice, and “stories...where people are making a difference” by engaging in justice work.

Justice issues or populations experiencing injustice that participants identified as relevant for CRC congregations included (in order of strength):

- Immigrant and refugee
- First Nations
- LGBTQ populations
- Cultural and racial diversity
- Representation of women
- Global justice (e.g. Third World justice)
- Human trafficking
- Mental illness
- Marketplace justice (e.g. corporate justice, investment justice)
- Prison system

Allow for Responses at All Levels

Ensuring that justice is encouraged and welcomed in all parts of the denomination was identified as important for mobilizing CRC people for justice. Participants shared their

ideas for the local, classis and denominational levels, and encouraged collaboration between these levels.

Local community (grassroots) level

Many research participants indicated that they would prefer to see grassroots justice initiatives arise naturally within local communities. CRC structures need to allow justice activity to emerge from outside the current ecclesial systems and not “squench” their momentum. Local responses were preferred by many because they “connect with people’s hearts” and naturally “start a movement.”

Classis level

The classis structure was often identified as a component of the CRC that could more effectively promote justice. The classis has the ability to see beyond any one congregation’s interests and collectively “take on a bigger agenda.” The classis was identified as having enough influence to be capable of “making culture” full of justice instead of following the path Canadian society dictates.

Denominational level

The denomination as a whole was recognized as a structure that could take on larger social justice issues. These issues should be chosen carefully, with particular attention to global issues that congregations and classes are not equipped to address. Again, it was suggested that the denomination should “inhabit culture” and lead by creating a standard different from mainstream culture.

Collaboration

Research participants saw a great opportunity for collaborative visioning and action within and between all levels discussed above. Collaboration between CRC congregations, especially those within the same classis, was considered necessary. “Missional centres” or “justice committees” were two examples of formal structures that could be created to encourage inter-congregational collaboration. Collaborating with non-CRC churches was also seen to be important. This would enable churches in the same community to partner in addressing injustices that confront their local community. Partnering with external community organizations who work with marginalized populations on a daily basis was also suggested as a way of collaborating to work for justice.

CONCLUSION

This report has presented the findings of a pilot research study. The purpose of this study was to provide an overview of the current CRC landscape related to justice—how people understand and do justice, the barriers to, and enablers of, further action for justice, and future strategies to mobilize CRC people to work for justice. The pilot study was also meant to provide a framework for future action research efforts within the CRC.

The project intentionally adopted an inductive approach, listening to CRC voices, even if this listening was limited in scope. The research findings provide evidence that while the CRC as a denomination formally acknowledges justice as an integral part of its mission and vision, how people “on-the-ground” understand and live out justice is less emphatic and varies considerably. It is apparent from these results that the CRC’s stated desire to “pursue God’s justice and peace in every area of life” is not lived out as consistently or completely as it could be. This underscores the value and importance of justice mobilization efforts.

The study’s results also suggest specific areas requiring attention in future mobilization efforts. Mobilization strategies include developing a clearer Biblical vision for justice, creating places for conversation, raising awareness within the CRC constituency, promoting justice leadership, and creating opportunities to confront injustice. Lastly, the study provides opportunity to reflect on how mobilization efforts are undertaken, at what organizational level or levels within the CRC, and how these levels ought to relate to each other.

In accordance with the community-based research (or action research) approach used in this study, the project was intended to mobilize 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 this project had encouraged them to reflect on how they understand and do justice, and had led to valuable conversations with others.

“I think there’s a real value in talking to the grass-roots, on-the-ground people, because I contacted a diverse group of people and it was really good to get input and just to do that was a good thing.” (Key Informant)

“I actually talked about this with my elders last night. That helped a lot, it was perfect just around the table, we kind of worked through it.” (Key Informant)

“[The focus group] was good to do - I was pleased with the level of interest the participants showed - you could tell they really enjoyed getting together like that.” (Focus Group Facilitator)

One key informant also reported that participation in this project had led to action.

“Because of this interview, I’ve done a fair bit of talking about [justice] and reading about [it], as it’s a topic that I’ve not spent a whole lot of time going deeply into. I think that’s probably my experience in the CRC... . It’s one of those things that I’ve avoided, if I’m honest. And now I realize why I’m avoiding it, because it’s a pretty complicated area. But at the same time, I think it’s been helpful for me. I want to preach on it, and then the next challenge is how do I practice it in a way that I can handle.” (Key Informant)

It is reasonable to conclude that this project succeeded in advancing justice mobilization efforts, even if only in relatively modest ways. As reported in the findings, creating spaces for critical reflection and conversation about justice is an important part of mobilizing for justice. It is encouraging that this action research approach shows promise in achieving the stated goal of informing *and advancing* justice mobilization efforts. Building on and deepening these accomplishments will be a welcome challenge in the subsequent project.

Next Steps

Now that this initial round of listening is complete, what is next? It is evident that the connection of justice and faith can be explored in much greater breadth and depth, and that there is a desire among CRC leaders, members and staff to do so.

One step will be to undertake a follow-up action research project entitled *Justice and Faith: Individual Spirituality and Social Responsibility in the Christian Reformed Church of Canada*. The research partners (CPRSE, CRC, CCBR) have been awarded a Partnership Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which will fund this project over a period of two years (2013-15).

Several observers have noted a growing trend in evangelical Christianity to emphasize personal piety over the collective pursuit of the common good (see Ehrenreich 2009; McClaren & Campolo 2003; Cavanaugh 2008). Yet concern for matters of social justice—poverty, inequality, oppression, hunger, and the like—has traditionally formed a core part of Christian self-understanding, including its evangelical expressions (see Rauschenbusch 1907). This next project will explore the extent to which this tension between personal piety and questions of larger social responsibility lives within the CRC in Canada. It also provides an opportunity to build on what has been learned in this pilot study, to further explore the connections between justice and faith in the CRC and to continue discovering how to live out justice as an integral component of Christian mission, vocation and discipleship.

Consistent with the community-situated and participatory approach of this pilot project, we invite you 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.

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