

# Proximity and cooperation key to justice and compassion

September 26, 2024

DALLAS—Speakers at a Fellowship Southwest conference challenged participants to think about the intersection between faith and justice.

Attitudes and structures keep justice and compassion outside the central focus of the American church, the speakers agreed.

But the keys to moving to the center the basic mandates of Christianity to care for the “Quartet of the Vulnerable”—widows, orphans, sojourners and the poor—are proximity and cooperation.

In a world where people learn differences are a threat, it’s difficult to live in solidarity, said [Cláudio Carvalhaes](#), professor at Union Theological Seminary. Particularly in the West, individualism replaces care and compassion.

This fractured and individualistic society creates a tendency to push one’s pain onto people who are more vulnerable—such as immigrants—blaming them for problems they have not created.

Instead, people must live by compassion and “be with the immigrants,” no matter what the world says, he continued. He urged attendees to view immigrants as gifts and to “love our neighbors.” He also questioned whether “we really want to be a Christian,” if there is an option not to care “for the least of these” as Jesus did.

Compassion fuels justice, Carvalhaes stated. All bear the image of God, immigrants included. It’s important to learn the root causes of migration and to be close to migrants, because the more one knows the stories of

migrants, the less fearful one becomes of them.

Only together can we engage the issue of immigration, Carvalhaes insisted. “I’m here for you, and we are here for the people who are suffering.”

## Rise anew



Justin Jones explains resurrection isn’t a moment, it’s a movement at FSW justice conference. (Photo / Calli Keener)

Justin Jones, Tennessee State Representative for District 52, offered an alternative vision for the South—where it doesn’t rise again, but instead can rise anew, better than it’s ever been before.

To change this country, “we have to change the South,” Jones asserted.

The youngest Black member of the Tennessee legislature described his experience in the Tennessee House, where Republican statesmen expelled him and the other young Black Democrat who spoke out following a shooting that killed six people at the [Covenant School in Nashville in 2023](#), but not the white woman who was with them.

They were reseated by their districts, but as a punishment for his “antics,” Jones was stripped of his committee and assigned to an agricultural committee, though he represented an inner-city district.

Not to be deterred from doing his job, he faced his fear of being a young Black man in rural Tennessee to visit with the farmers he was tasked with considering.

He described being greeted by MAGA hats, American flags and Fox News

in the background, but he also found something he didn't expect to be there—appreciation.

The farmers told Jones he was the only politician who'd ever visited them to find out what their needs were. And if he needed them to back him up at the statehouse, they told him they would be there—with manure to dump on the steps, if necessary.

He told them to hold off on the manure. But he said, “loving our neighbors isn't just a word, it's an action.”

People can come together to end centuries old systems, but “resurrection requires proximity.”

Jesus had to be at the tomb to raise Lazarus, Jones said, so he could say: “Move the stone.”

“But if the stone's removed, there'll be a smell,” the people warned Jesus.

Parts of resurrection may be unpleasant, but Christians must still “show up” and unbind them, Jones insisted. These “dry bones” can live again.

## **Barriers to racial justice**



Sandra María Van Opstal discusses barriers to racial justice. (Photo / Calli Keener)

Sandra María Van Opstal, executive director of Chasing Justice, discussed barriers to racial justice, the first being distorted and dysfunctional narratives. The stories we tell ourselves, songs and the way we interpret Scripture shape our beliefs, she said. And the stories we tell ourselves shape what we believe about others.

White supremacy and American exceptionalism are two distorted narratives that have become internalized, then externalized in policy and systems until they became “the air we breathe,” she explained.

Likewise, discriminatory policies “affect the way we live with each other.” Christians vote according to their own needs, instead of in light of God’s commandment to care for “the quartet of the vulnerable.”

Furthermore, discipleship problems form barriers to racial justice. Van Opstal said Christians might push the other barriers off onto somebody else, but they can’t blame anyone else for this barrier.

She pointed squarely at Donald McGavran—the father of the church growth movement in the 1970s and 1980s—and his “homogenous unit principal,” or the missiological idea that church planting efforts are more successful when they focus on people of common characteristics.

“It’s our fault” discipleship is a barrier to racial justice, Van Opstal insisted.

McGavran’s idea is why “we have youth ministries, and children’s ministries, and motorcycle ministries,” because it’s easier to get people in the door when they have common traits, Van Opstal continued.

“The problem is, that’s not the way of Jesus. So structurally and systemically, we taught people to be and practice biases. We invited them to always elect to be with people just like them,” she said.

“They said people are more likely to become Christians if they don’t have to cross racial, linguistic or class barriers. Let’s make it easy for them to say ‘yes’ to Jesus. ... When that’s the opposite of what we see in Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians,” where Christians came together to the table, regardless of class or where they came from.

“The reason Christians were called Christians is because they didn’t know

what else to call them. They didn't look alike. They didn't practice the same expressions of faith. They didn't come from the same places," she said.

So Christians must "interrogate the stories we believe" and reorient toward Christ. Christians must change how they view people and how they "name them." People are not criminals, aliens, poor—they are "our neighbors," she insisted.

Other conference speakers included Mariah Humphries, Mvskoke Nation citizen and executive director for [The Center for Formation, Justice and Peace](#); Cassandra Gould, senior strategist at the [Faith in Action National Network](#); and [Jeremy Everett](#), executive director of the [Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty](#).