

Voices: For churches, justice should be in the core values

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EDITOR'S NOTE: "Justice looks like ..." is a special series in the Voices column. Readers will have the opportunity to consider justice from numerous viewpoints. The series is based on each writer's understanding of Scripture and relationship with Jesus Christ. Writers present their own views independent of any institution, unless otherwise noted in their bios.

You are encouraged to listen to each writer without prejudice. Then, engage in conversation with others around you about what justice looks like to you.

[Click here](#) for more information about the series. [Click here](#) to read the full "Justice looks like..." series.

After three lively breakfast conversations 28 years ago, five homeless men and women living under the overpass at Interstate 35 and N. 4th Street in Waco, invited my wife and me to lead a Bible study with them.

On Sunday, Sept. 20, 1992, a handful of us gathered below the roar of overhead traffic to read a chapter from Romans, sing a couple of songs and discuss the issues they struggle with each day. They continued to invite us back and began to call our growing circle "Church Under the Bridge." One of the "panhandlers" changed his sign from "Work for Food" to "Come to Bible Study."

Over the next several months, deep friendships grew. Janet and I learned to listen genuinely to them, hear their stories of pain and rejection and

include them in the Sunday morning Bible studies as readers, pray-ers and singers.

No matter how poorly they read, prayed or sang, participation in the “church” laid the foundation for what would become a multicultural congregation of Black, white and brown worshippers. They were poor and middle-class, ex-offenders and college students, and those with mental health issues and severe addictions.

As the circle grew wider, we realized God was up to something we were beginning to understand. To protect us from straying into the captivity of traditional church expectations, our group began to have conversations about our core values that should guide our future.

Our core values

The mutually agreed upon values were:

- Our call would be based on God’s word, confirmed by the Holy Spirit and body of Christ.
- Our call was outwardly focused toward the unchurched who would rarely attend other churches.
- Our call was to the poor and marginalized.
- Biblical justice would be a guiding theme of our church.
- Our call was to be multicultural.
- Our call was to be interdenominational.
- We would de-emphasize attractive and expensive buildings.
- Discipleship would occur mostly through small groups.
- Our call was to be based on “life-together.”

These core values have proven significant, especially as the church grew. Expectations came out as statements and questions:

- “We need a building to keep us out of bad weather and the traffic noise above.”
- “How do we handle the wide variety of doctrinal disparities, especially when some were clearly unbiblical?”
- “Do we let the prostitute read the Scripture or the alcoholic take a drink during the service, or accept the outbursts of some of those with severe mental illness?”
- “How do we spend our relatively small budget?”
- “How do we respond to racial injustices in our own community?”

Injustices in our congregation

Perhaps even more challenging was what to do when we came face to face with injustices experienced by our congregation. Some experienced illegal arrests with no money to bond out and unfair extended pre-trial waits. Most of our working poor made minimum wages and could never break their poverty. Some of them worked three part-time jobs, since employers refused to offer health insurance.

Affordable housing in our community was virtually filled; so, many members of our church slept in cars or on the couches of friends. There were very few beds for those lower-income friends in addition.

Ex-offenders struggled to find work because of past incarceration. Health care was non-existent for those below some guidelines. Because Texas was 48th out of 50 states in funds for the mentally ill, there were few caseworkers and providers to help them. The outdated public bus system took almost two hours to go anywhere, requiring workers to leave very early and get home late.

Responding to injustice here and beyond

The same year Church Under the Bridge began, a Christian foundation provided funds for us to create Mission Waco, Mission World. This nonprofit gave us the platform to address several of these formidable injustices.

We started a job training program and worked with local employers to hire them. We created a Christian-based residential alcohol and drug home that far exceeds public recovery data. We built a 56-bed homeless shelter called “My Brother’s Keeper” and invited churches to lead evening devotions.

We found volunteer lawyers to give “advice” to our folks entangled in legal issues. We created the Meyer Center for Urban Ministries staffed by social workers, mental health counselors, a “free clinic” and breakfast for the homeless.

We even created the Jubilee Food Market, a nonprofit grocery store, to provide healthy and affordable food for our food desert neighborhood.

Finally, based on our call to work “without borders,” we now have a microloan program for women in Haiti, support for 300 children to attend school, water well drilling, some basic health care for a semi-nomadic Muslim group in India and finances for a Baptist church in Mexico City that serves more than 200 homeless each Sunday morning.

Church Under the Bridge helps fund several of these justice projects. In fact, almost one-half of our budget goes to empower them. Our core values have continued to guide our direction and help us avoid the pitfalls of becoming apathetic to the world around us.

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