

Voices: Justice looks like the best health care for all women

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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 prejudgment. 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.

Justice is a complicated topic for me. As an African American woman who grew up in the South, I can speak more readily to my experience with injustice.

I step outside my comfort zone here, pushing aside a painful familiarity with the ugliness of injustice, to dream optimistically about what justice could and should look like.

Justice can be defined most simply as "getting what you deserve." It is easy to think of this through the perspective of a person who commits a crime getting a "just" penalty.

Justice also looks like having your basic needs meet, getting the care you deserve and being loved as you deserve to be loved.

In this current season of my life, justice looks like providing every underserved woman in Central Texas access to low-cost, high-quality, personalized gynecological and pregnancy health services. I am the CEO of a nonprofit women's health clinic in Austin called The Source, and this is our mission.

Our mission

I sat down last year with our leadership team to talk about why we feel called to this work. For each of us, it came down to one thing—love. God's love for us and his command for us to love others as ourselves is at the core of why we believe every woman deserves excellent health care.

The women we serve matter, because they are valued and loved by the Creator of the universe, who created them in his image.

Justice looks like giving underserved women access to essential health care, with providers who listen compassionately, acknowledge their concerns, and address their medical needs in a way that honors their value and worth as a person.

Racial inequality in health care

Why have I come to define justice in terms of access to health care? In our country, there are tremendous disparities in the quality of health care provided to Black and brown women, especially those below the poverty line.

What is more disheartening is, despite decades of progress, many of these inequalities are the product of our country's long, painful history of racial discrimination.

In an April 2016 University of Virginia study, researchers found "[Black](#)

[Americans are systematically undertreated for pain](#) relative to white Americans.” The study included 418 medical students and residents.

At least half of those studied expressed some level of racial bias in their diagnosis and treatment of Black patients based on the belief that Blacks feel pain less than whites. This means there are medical professionals who falsely believe there is a biological difference in how Blacks and whites experience pain. As a result, Black patients are less likely to have their pain acknowledged, and when it is, they are prescribed less pain medication than their white counterparts.

This misinformation has been perpetuated since the time of slavery, when physicians, researchers and slave owners justified the torture of Black slaves by subjecting them to medical experiments because of the belief Blacks had a higher threshold for pain.

The repercussions of this ignorant bias are more Black women in Texas and throughout the United States are dying due to unaddressed complications after childbirth.

Excellence in health care for all women

According to the Center for American Progress: “Structural racism in health care and social service delivery means that [African American women often receive poorer quality care than white women](#). It means the denial of care when African American women seek help when enduring pain or that health care and social service providers fail to treat them with dignity and respect.”

I have read and heard story after story of Black women who complain of pain after childbirth having their concerns dismissed and being discharged

from the hospital. They are sent home, only later to suffer a stroke, heart attack or other fatal condition. This is not what any woman deserves. This is not justice.

Justice looks like a woman walking into a women's clinic, OB-GYN's office or hospital and being treated like a VIP-patient regardless of her color, race, ethnicity, sexual history, level of education, employment status or ability to pay.

Justice looks like a woman's concerns being acknowledged and addressed with compassion and urgency. Justice looks like doctors, nurses and surgeons providing all women their very best care, the care they deserve. That is what justice looks like.

Rev. Mary Whitehurst has a heart for ministering to girls and young women in crisis and is executive director of services for The Source, a free and low-cost women's clinic and resource center in Austin and Houston.

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