

The Difference between Justice and Mission

Justice and Mission are two sides of the same coin. The side of mission faces toward that part of God's creation that is in immediate need. Mission is our responsibility to help those who are in need. This need could be materialistic, emotional or spiritual. The side of justice faces those who are in power. Justice is our responsibility to address the causes in the world that create those materialistic, emotional and spiritual needs. God teaches us that through the divine creation, all of God's creatures have enough to meet all our needs. But, because of the fallen nature of that creation, the balance has been skewed. God's abundance is not distributed fairly to all. As Christians, we are called to provide to those in need when and where we are able. Because the imbalance of creation is so great, and because our own power is limited by both our mortality and our own sin, we do not have the ability to correct creation's imbalance on our own. But we do have the power to teach and persuade so that powers greater than our own can help to bring creation closer into balance.

In most of our congregations, we tend to emphasize mission work over justice work. Why? Because people rarely stand in the way of what we do to help people in need. Collecting food for the Food Pantry or buying Christmas gifts for needy families not only are encouraged by our society, but they are accomplishments that make us feel good about ourselves and others. Works of justice are works that are neither encouraged in our society nor do that give us a feeling of warmth and accomplishment. Justice work is difficult; it is more often than not done in the midst of conflict. Think about how we talk about doing justice: we fight for justice while we engage in mission. And yet we are called not to do one or the other but to do both.

In the church neither mission work nor justice work are ends in themselves. They are work that we are called to do together. Handing out food, clothing and providing shelter is crucial work, but it is insufficient if we do not, at the same time, fight to address the imbalances in the world (or, at the least, in our community) that keep those imbalances intact. We have found out, in our meetings in the Committee for Justice and Witness of the Fox Valley Association, that it is difficult to keep mission and justice separate. And yet, with the limited time and energy that we are granted, it is necessary to build a bridge between the two.

Even as they are two sides of the same coin, justice and mission are two separate callings. Not everyone has the talent to engage in justice work nor can everyone find satisfaction in mission work. Fortunately, God brings those of differing talents to work the two sides together. Justice and missions are complimentary, just as God's mercy and grace are complimentary. And even as they are complements, they need to be balanced. We need both sides to accomplish the task given to us. It is crucial that we do not mistake our mission work for justice work, and vice versa. As the Book of James points out so poignantly, what good is our faith to someone naked and starving if we are not able to give them food and clothing? But, in flipping the coin over, what good is it for us to give food and clothing, when there are powers standing behind the naked and hungry ready to take that food and clothing away from them?

We are challenging our congregations in our Association to consider how we can do both mission and justice together. We understand that while some are called to do works of mission others are called to work for justice. We are not working in competition but together. Our challenge is how to do this work of God efficiently.

By Rev. Brian Cope
Pastor of The Congregational Church of Algonquin
Chair, FVA Justice & Witness Committee