


Just Faith? A National Survey Connecting Faith and Justice Within the Christian Reformed Church

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Abstract Does the call to pursue justice live in the hearts and minds of contemporary Christians? If so, to what extent? In order to address these questions, our research team used a community-based research approach to investigate how Christians in a specific denomination (the Christian Reformed Church in North America) conceptualize the relationship between justice and faith, what priority justice holds in their lives, and the barriers and enablers they identify to pursuing justice. This article reports on the findings of a survey that was distributed to a representative sample of 264 congregational members across Canada. Findings show that understandings of justice from “the pew” are multifaceted even if conceptually vague. Yet justice is clearly understood as being connected to faith even if there is ambiguity as to how it fits into the spectrum of Christian life. There is subsequently a need to assist congregants in translating their awareness of injustice and desire for justice into action. In particular, survey results emphasize the importance of pairing a Christian vision for justice with opportunities to experience exemplars of justice work. Further research could explore the extent to which these on-the-ground perspectives are shared across Christian and other faith traditions, and across world regions.

Keywords Social justice · Faith-based perspectives · Denominational survey · Community-based research

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Introduction

Historically, Christians have regularly contributed to, and in many cases even led, movements for progressive social change. One thinks here of the abolitionist movement in Great Britain in the early nineteenth century led by William Wilberforce, a British MP and convert to evangelical Christianity. Other examples include the American Civil Rights movement, led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., or the Catholic Workers movement, led by the devout Catholic Dorothy Day. In each case, these Christian leaders understood their religious faith as something that compelled them to pursue the cause of social justice (see King 1963; Day 1963).

But what specifically is it about the Christian faith that renders the pursuit of justice so compelling for adherents like Wilberforce, Day, and King? For starters, one might point to a myriad of texts in both testaments of the Christian scriptures encouraging such a stance. Whether it is the God of Exodus liberating a suffering people from bondage, or the prophets taking the side of the widow, orphan, and stranger against oppressive imperial power, or Jesus proclaiming good news to the poor and freedom to the prisoners, the call to pursue justice sounds loudly and clearly, if one has the ears to hear it. Given this state of affairs, it is not surprising to find Christians acting throughout history for the cause of social justice.

But what about today? Does the call to pursue justice still live in the hearts and minds of contemporary Christians? An answer to this broad question could be gleaned by asking two more-focused questions: (1) How do Christians today conceptualize the relationship between justice and faith (understanding justice)? and (2) To what extent are Christians today involved in justice work (doing justice)? This second question could be further expanded to consider the priority of justice in the lives of contemporary Christians, as well as the barriers and enablers they identify to pursuing justice.

Our research team sought to investigate these two main questions from the perspective of Christians within one western Christian tradition (i.e., the Christian Reformed Church in North America). We began with conceptualizations, recognizing that how people *do justice* may (at least partially) be informed by how they *understand justice*. Indeed, the broader North American literature reflects various major conceptualizations of justice. Wolterstorff (2008) observes that philosophers have long distinguished between two basic categories of justice: *distributive* justice (which he terms “primary justice”), and *corrective* justice. Distributive justice is concerned with the just entitlement to and fair distribution of societal resources (Lamont and Favor 2014; Konow 2001), whereas corrective justice is concerned with making wrongs right, either retributively by determining and imposing punishment of wrongdoers when wrongs are committed (Walen 2014; Jenkins 2011) or restoratively by repairing harm through the active involvement of both victim and offender (Zehr 2002). Corrective justice only becomes relevant when there is a breakdown of distributive justice (Wolterstorff 2008). A third and more contemporary category for defining justice is *procedural justice*, which is concerned with how decisions are made (Skitka and Crosby 2003; Jenkins 2011) including ensuring

equitable participation in decision-making processes on issues impacting one's life and community (Fondacaro and Weinberg 2002).

Conceptualizations that are specifically Christian add a theological dimension to these main categories. A robust understanding of justice in a Christian context therefore requires attention to religious commitment, particularly beliefs related to God's character and to God's actions in the world. Marshall (2005) views the "call to justice" as an inescapable aspect of Christian faith. He summarizes the peculiarity of a Christian approach to understanding justice by stating that "the place to learn about justice, first and foremost, is the biblical narrative of God's creative, sustaining, and redeeming activity in the world." (Marshall 2005, p. 8). Wolterstorff (1983, 2008, 2013) also argues that God and justice are intimately intertwined. In his view, a biblical vision of justice such as the biblical notion of "shalom" shape a Christian understanding of justice. In addition, Wolterstorff and others also take pains to distinguish faith-filled justice activity from the Christian duty of charity. For them, acts of charity and mercy are designed to meet human need. Justice on the other hand implies dismantling unjust systemic barriers (or addressing the root causes of human need that are created by unjust institutions. See Wolterstorff 2006). These and other conceptualizations found in the literature underscore the multi-dimensional nature of justice as a social construct, even from a distinctively Christian perspective (Fondacaro and Weinberg 2002; Houston and Todd 2013).

The link between faith and justice has some empirical support. Past research has suggested that Christian faith is born and developed in contexts that tend to facilitate the call to understand and exercise justice (Putnam and Campbell 2012; Smith and Davidson 2014; Smidt et al. 2008). Members of churches within the United States, for example, have been found to be not only "more generous neighbors and more conscientious citizens than their secular counterparts" (Putnam and Campbell 2012: 444), but that their commitment to social engagement lasts, on average, longer than that of a secular citizen (Smidt et al. 2008). Putnam and Campbell further identify civic engagement, generosity, and trustworthiness as the most significant expressions of the religious commitment to justice in the public sphere. They attribute this "religious edge" in good citizenship to the fact that churches constitute some of the last surviving spaces for the transmission of civic norms and values. This coincides with Smith's hypothesis that there is a correlation between generosity and personal growth and life purpose (Smith and Davidson 2014), both of which remain central to the church's understanding of what constitutes a true Christian life. Both studies correlate the theological dimension of justice with the relational character of civic engagement and generosity, rooted in the Christian understanding of the notion of neighbour (see Putnam and Campbell 2012 on the Golden Rule: 463).

If faith and justice are in fact somehow intertwined, as the preceding paragraphs illustrate, what factors serve as barriers to and facilitators of moving Christians from *thinking about justice* to actually *doing justice work*? Obstacles to the pursuit of justice include general privilege dynamics that are common to both secular and religious communities in North America, including various forms of socioeconomic privilege and homogeneity causing a lack of awareness or empathy for diverse social issues such as racism and poverty (Gilbreath 2006). Others have noted how

negative feelings such as guilt, low self-worth, and fear act as barriers to social justice engagement among the religiously active (Todd and Rufa 2013). Perhaps the most prevalent example of a religiously specific obstacle to justice mobilization suggested in the literature is a trend toward pietistic individualism; a spiritual prioritizing of nurturing individual faith at the expense of encouraging robust engagement with social issues (Haluzi-Delay 2008; Goudzwaard 2002; Guder 2001). Related obstacles to justice include the prosperity gospel which views the accumulation of material wealth as the paramount form of divine blessing, or the so-called dispensational premillennial theology that informs the popular *Left Behind* series of novels as encouraging Christians to think of the present earth as of little consequence, one day to be consumed by fire after the elect have been snatched away. All of these perspectives seem to take one some distance away from the scriptural call to secure justice for ‘the least of these’ (Middleton 2014).

There are also many facilitators of justice mobilization mentioned in the literature. For example, Todd and Rufa (2013) cite resources such as time, energy, money, knowledge, and congregational leadership as key facilitators of social justice engagement. Others point to theological resources, including a renewed emphasis on reading the Bible holistically as a story of *cosmic* (and therefore social and material), as opposed to merely *personal* or *spiritual*, redemption (Glanville 2013; Snyder Belousek 2012; Wright 2006; Middleton 2014). Still others have drawn attention to the importance of spiritual disciplines such as regular prayer and worship as remedies for the phenomenon of “cause fatigue,” which constantly plagues aspirations for long-term social change (Wigg-Stevenson 2013; Cannon 2013). These religiously specific catalysts for justice mobilization have been well-documented in historical exemplars, perhaps most prominently in the life and influence of Mother Teresa and the aforementioned Martin Luther King, Jr. (Cannon 2013; Taylor 2010).

While the life of such past Christian heroes might be inspiring, they are hardly indicative of the typical Christian believer today. Justice may be regarded as an important—even integral—value for Christians to embrace and put into practice, but as Todd and Rufa (2013) observe, “less is understood about how everyday individuals understand, define, and act for social justice” (p. 315). Indeed, much of the literature we reviewed is theoretical, lacking on-the-ground perspectives gained through empirical research with religious adherents themselves.

This article addresses this gap and explores the dynamics of understanding and doing justice among the adherents of one particular religious denomination, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). Specifically it reports on the Canadian arm of this bi-national denomination, drawing on a representative survey of members across Canada. It thus foregrounds perspectives “from the pew,” identifying justice conceptualizations and factors that serve as important facilitators and barriers to doing justice in this particular religious context. Providing insight into the ways a particular religious denomination in the Protestant Christian world conceives of the connection between faith and justice may also shed light on similar dynamics at work in the larger contemporary Christian (and multi-faith) context.

Methodology

Research Purpose and Design

The survey of CRCNA congregants was one method within a national research partnership. The purpose of the two-year project was to more fully understand the relationship between justice and faith in the CRCNA and to mobilize CRCNA people to embrace justice as an integral aspect of Christian faith and life. The research sought to answer three main questions: (a) How is the relationship between justice and faith currently understood and practiced in North American (especially Canadian, evangelical) Christianity?, (b) To what extent is doing justice a priority in the faith lives of CRCNA congregants?, and (c) How can CRCNA people best be mobilized to embrace justice as an integral part of Christian faith and life?

The project was comprised of two phases, beginning with a multi-method research phase before moving to a knowledge mobilization phase. The survey method was part of the project's first phase, being designed to provide breadth of information to supplement in-depth opinions gained from the study's other more qualitative methods (i.e., key informant interviews and literature review) (Patton 2002).

Research Approach

The study used a community-based research approach which can be defined as an “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 et al. 1998, p. 12). A stakeholder steering committee of national church leaders and members guided all stages of the research study, including the survey design, sampling and distribution plan, analysis, and dissemination. The subsequent knowledge mobilization phase included holding local community forums for CRCNA members across Canada as well as other ecumenical events where study findings (including survey data) were presented and discussed, including through the use of professional theatre. The use of a community-based research approach enabled power sharing among researchers and congregational leaders, both in terms of sharing control of the study design and implementation, as well as in sharing future action (Ochocka et al. 2002; Ochocka and Janzen 2014).

Data Collection Instrument

A survey was developed and distributed to a representative sample of CRCNA members across Canada. The English-only survey was developed using web-based software (SurveyMonkey.com). After being pilot tested, the survey was distributed to selected members between March and July 2014. The study was approved by the Community Research Ethics Office housed within the Centre for Community Based

Research. A decision to respond to the invitation to participate was understood as being consent to participate.

The survey included 37 questions which were grouped into six sections: participant demographics (eight questions), understanding faith (two questions), understanding justice (eight questions), the priority of justice (three questions), doing justice (nine questions), and looking to the future (five questions). The survey intentionally did not pre-define the terms “faith” or “justice,” but rather allowed participants to more inductively indicate their views of faith and justice through a series of closed and open-ended questions that were informed by existing literature. The specific survey questions are available by contacting the corresponding author.

Sampling and Data Analysis

A two-stage cluster sampling strategy (Bryman et al. 2009) was used to randomly sample participants from a population of 41,179 CRCNA members within 246 congregations nation-wide. The first stage involved randomly selecting 78 CRCNA congregations across Canada, stratified by region (i.e., Classis) and urban/rural communities, and inviting them to participate in the survey. Fifty congregations agreed to participate. The second stage began by identifying a survey “champion” within each congregation. The champion then randomly selected six active adult professing members from their church membership list. The champion invited selected people to participate offering either an on-line or paper copy version of the self-administered survey. Champions were instructed to continue inviting randomly selected members until they had reached six participants. A total of 28 congregations (56 % of the sample) achieved full participation, 16 congregations (32 %) had four or five participants, and six congregations (12 %) had three or fewer participants. A total of 264 people participated in the survey. The refusal rate for congregations was 36 %. The refusal rate for individuals in participating congregations was also 36 %. The congregant participation rates are comparable or higher than other church-based research (e.g., Reimer 2007; Woolever and Bruce 2010). The sampling error was calculated at $\pm 6\%$ at the 95 % confidence level. Quantitative data was analyzed using the statistical software SPSS, while open-ended qualitative data was analyzed via content coding.

Survey Findings

Participant Demographics

The survey sample was generally consistent with CRCNA demographic characteristics captured in other denominational datasets (e.g., Rice et al. 2013). The mean age of respondents was 50 years, with a median of 51 years. Just over half (54 %) of respondents were female. Respondents’ self-reported ethno-racial identity revealed a relatively homogenous sample, with 81 % utilizing the terms “Caucasian,” “White,” “Dutch,” or “other European” as ways to identify their primary ethno-racial identity and another 14 % reporting “Canadian.” Just over half (51 %) of

respondents lived in a small town or rural area. Respondents were spread across Canada, representative of the geographic distribution of CRCNA congregations and membership levels. Two-thirds of respondents (66 %) had attended their particular congregation for 10 years or longer. The same number (66 %) considered themselves to be more active in congregational life than average, indicating that our sample is likely skewed to more active CRCNA members.

Conceptualizing Justice

Respondents displayed various ways of understanding justice, a theme that was evident in both closed- and open-ended responses. When asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with several statements about the meaning of justice, respondents ranked them all highly (see Fig. 1). The strongest conceptualization (91 % agreed) was “that people are treated fairly,” followed closely by “those who break laws are held accountable” (89 %). “Root causes” (85 %) and “systemic barriers” (81 %) were ranked similarly, followed by restoring broken relationships (80 %), helping those in need (79 %), and inclusion (74 %). The high levels of agreement across all justice statements indicates that individual respondents were typically willing to hold multiple conceptions of what justice meant to them. This point also surfaced within open-ended responses. When asked to define justice in a single sentence, nearly one-fifth of respondents (18 %) referenced more than one concept, with more than 18 codes of responses being cited across all respondents.

To a lesser extent, the diversity of perspectives in conceptualizing justice was also evident in how respondents understood God’s role versus the role of people in making a change in the world. When asked a closed-ended question about their understanding of human action in the context of their Christian faith, two-thirds of respondents (67 %) elevated God’s role above their own, selecting the statement, “God works through people God calls, and in answering that call I can act to help advance God’s kingdom” as their preferred response. All but three other respondents (29 %) held the role of God and humans in tension, selecting the statement, “God has a plan but the details are not set; God gives us the ability and chance to make free decisions that impact our lives and the world we live in.” The presence of these two understandings was also found in the single-sentence understanding of justice in response to the open-ended question: “If you had to write a one sentence definition of ‘justice’, what would it be?” Respondents described a world where justice was purely God’s doing (e.g., *God is in control of justice in our lives; God makes all things right*), or a world where humans worked in conjunction with God (e.g., *Justice is when God uses his people to break down the work of oppressors on small and large scales; [Justice is] to look to God for help and understanding [of underlying factors] so that help can be provided to overcome the injustice*).

Despite the numerous ways that respondents conceptualized justice, there was nevertheless a strong emphasis on understanding justice from the perspective of Christian faith. In their one-sentence definition of justice, nearly half of respondents (49 %) explicitly linked their understanding of justice to God or other matters of faith, either by citing biblical passages or phrases, or clearly referring to God in

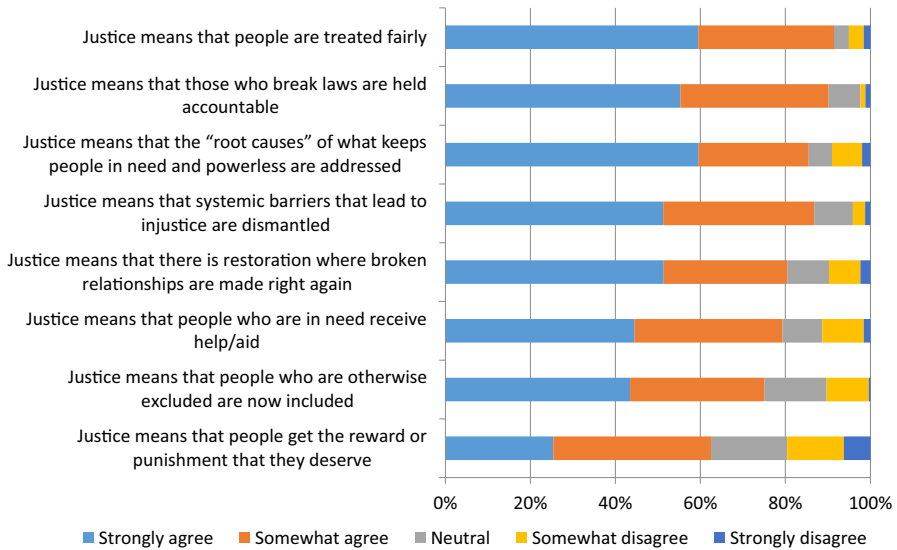


Fig. 1 Understanding the meanings of justice

relation to justice (e.g., *Love your neighbour as you love yourself; Justice is listening to the convictions of the what Holy Spirit tells you to do; Try to do what Jesus did; Justice is acting in accord with God’s laws and Scripture; God’s will being done on earth; Justice is doing the right thing for all with using God as your compass; Fair and equal treatment for all regardless of race, religion, social standing, physical or mental capacity administered through the love of Christ and based on based on the principles set forth by his Word*). Of these, a large subset (76 %) only referenced faith-concepts when defining justice.

This strong connection between faith and justice was also consistent in other survey responses. For example, Fig. 2 shows that all five closed-ended questions linking justice and faith in a positive way were met with considerable agreement (ranging from 86 % of respondents agreeing that “being a Christian requires me to pursue justice,” to 75 % agreeing that “doing justice work draws me closer to God.”). The three negatively worded questions met with majority disagreement, re-emphasizing the link between justice and faith although not as emphatically. In particular, 23 % of respondents agreed that “pursuing justice is important, but it is not related to my faith.” However, the majority of respondents (70 %) still disagreed with this statement, in keeping with the trend.

Interestingly, when respondents were asked to rate the importance of various aspects of their Christian faith, the priority of justice amidst other faith activities was somewhat diminished (see Fig. 3). Respondents were generally very positive in assessing the importance of various activities to Christian faith. For all response options, more than 80 % of respondents indicated the stated activity was either “very important” or “somewhat important” to Christian faith. However, respondents rated “supporting efforts to identify and address systemic injustice” least

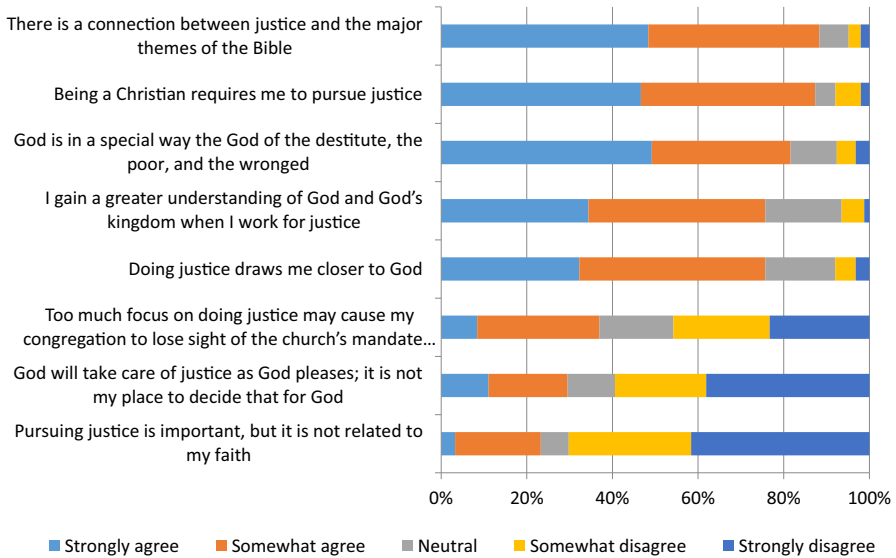


Fig. 2 Justice and its relation to Christian faith

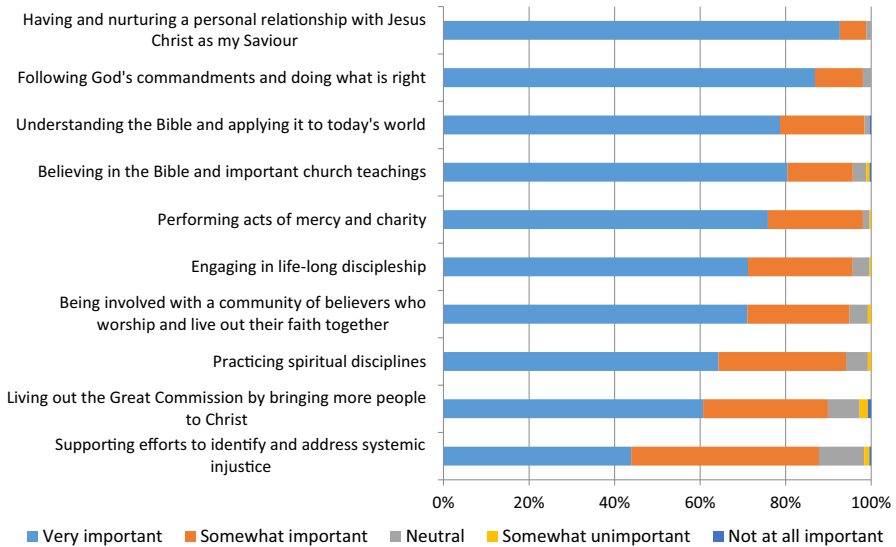


Fig. 3 Activities and their importance to Christian faith

strongly; an equal number responded that this was “very important” (41 %) or “somewhat important” (41 %) to Christian faith. Contrast these opinions with respondents who rated “performing acts of mercy and charity” as “very important” (76 %) or “somewhat important” (22 %).

Doing Justice

The Priority of Justice in Christian Living

Despite the strong affirmation of the link between Christian faith and doing justice, most respondents reported that justice was not the top priority in their Christian faith and life. A nearly equal number of respondents said that justice was a secondary concern in their own lives (50 %) and in the lives of their fellow congregants (53 %). Similarly, 37 % said that they and their fellow congregation members (38 %) would be “somewhat likely” to pursue justice even if it meant changing their present lifestyle. However, respondents consistently reported that they prioritized justice more than their fellow congregation members. For example, 43 % of respondents reported that justice was a “central concern” in their own Christian faith and life, compared to 32 % of others in their congregation. Similarly, 46 % of respondents reported that they would be “likely” or “very likely” to pursue justice even if it meant changing their present lifestyle; only 31 % stated the same for others in their congregation.

Those who considered justice to be a central concern in their own faith and life were significantly¹ more likely to disagree that “too much focus on doing justice may cause my congregation to lose sight of the church’s mandate to make followers of Jesus and to teach and equip them.” Those who reported themselves as not likely to pursue justice if it meant changing their present lifestyle also de-emphasized human agency in bringing about justice. They were significantly² more likely to agree with the statement that “God will take care of justice as God pleases; it is not my place to decide that for God.” Finally, and not surprisingly, those who indicated that justice was a higher priority in their life were significantly³ more likely to be involved with activities related to pursuing justice.

There was a range of ways that people expressed their justice work. For individual respondents who were active within their local context, the most common justice work involved meal-distribution services, soup kitchens, and homeless supports. The most common activities within the national or international contexts for individuals included financially supporting CRCNA sponsored agencies, purchasing fair-trade products, and financially supporting other faith-based justice-related agencies.

Facilitators of Doing Justice

Most respondents indicated that they would like to learn more about justice (70 %) and be more active in doing justice (64 %). Almost no one reported being uninterested in learning more (4 %), or being uninterested in more actively pursuing justice (5 %). Across several questions, two strong facilitators of working for justice emerged: having a clear Christian vision for justice (i.e., knowing *why Christians*

¹ $\chi^2(4, N = 245) = 13.651, p = 0.008.$

² $\chi^2(4, N = 231) = 11.324, p = 0.023.$

³ $\chi^2(4, N = 232) = 15.940, p = 0.003.$

should pursue it), and experiencing justice in action, whether through stories, leaders, or personal experience (i.e., seeing and hearing *what justice looks like in practice*).

More than half of respondents (56 %) indicated that seeing the example of others who promote and do justice work motivated them “a great deal” or “much” to work for justice. A clearly articulated vision for justice was the second most common motivator for justice (54 %), followed by “Hearing stories of justice work” (50 %). In a related, but future-looking question, 60 % of respondents said that “Having a clearly articulated biblical vision of justice” would help “a great deal” or “much” if they wanted to work for justice more.

The two dominant facilitators of justice action mentioned above (i.e., a clear Christian vision of justice and experiencing justice in action) were reinforced through the qualitative open-ended responses. When describing what made respondents interested or excited about working for justice, two similar themes emerged. For many, doing justice stemmed from vision, pursued because it was an expression of faithful Christian living and an act of fulfilling God’s call (*I feel it is our calling as Christians to work for justice; To me it is a part in how I live out my faith; Knowing that God can use me to help change people’s lives for the better, that I can help make a difference in the world, that I can be an agent of hope and healing*). For others, pursuing justice was inspired by seeing the results or hearing about the positive impact of justice work (*Listening to others tell their stories about their experiences working for justice; Seeing the difference in the lives of those receiving justice; Seeing public opinion and social policy change to protect the most vulnerable in society; Seeing and experiencing my parents and older siblings ‘doing justice’*).

The importance of experiential learning through relationships was echoed when respondents were asked where they would turn to learn more about justice. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (65 %) said that they would be most likely to talk to friends or fellow church members if they wanted to learn more about justice. Slightly fewer (57 %) said that they would find a faith-based organization that matches personal interests; that is, they would develop a relationship with a faith-based institution or organization. These responses were higher than other strategies that provide factual information, whether, for example, searching for information online, finding a book to read, or joining a Bible study.

Barriers to Doing Justice

There were three main themes that emerged concerning what prevented people from working for justice: (1) complexity, (2) lack of time, and (3) lack of awareness. Figure 4 shows the barriers to doing justice. Thirty-three percent indicated that the strongest barrier, “I don’t have time, being busy with other things in life” had prevented them “a great deal” or “much” from working for justice. The next highest rated barriers had similar response rates: “Justice seems so complex, it’s hard to know what to do” (27 %) and “I’m not very exposed to people who experience injustice” (30 %).

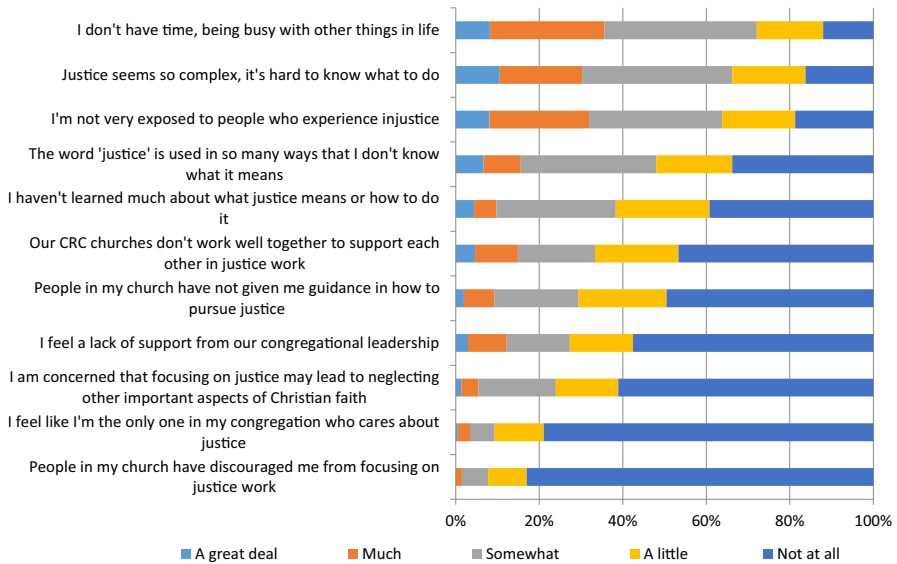


Fig. 4 Factors preventing justice work

The qualitative responses echoed these quantitative findings. A major barrier for justice action was the complexity and perceived size and scope of justice issues (*Don't know where to start or what to do; The complexity of it and a lack of focus about where to put my energy*). Another barrier was that people were too busy or had other priorities (*The time involved, such a busy life style that I wonder where I can find the time and energy to help others; My church has other priorities*). A third theme was the lack of knowledge, awareness, and preparedness for justice work (*We do not hear much about specific needs for justice; Just do not know enough*).

Interestingly, very few respondents (5 %) agreed that focusing on justice may lead to neglecting other important aspects of Christian faith; 66 % said that this was “not at all” a barrier to doing justice. This barrier corresponds to an earlier question, where 36 % of respondents agreed that “too much focus on doing justice may cause my congregation to lose sight of the church’s mandate to make followers of Jesus and to teach and equip them”. Forty-four percent of respondents disagreed with this statement.

Discussion

We began the article by posing the questions of how contemporary Christians conceptualize the relationship between justice and faith (understanding justice), and to what extent they are involved in justice work (doing justice). In particular, we were interested in answering this question from the vantage point of the typical person “in the pew.” The discussion below provides insight into these questions.

Understanding Justice

So what have we learned about how people understand justice and its relation to their faith? To begin, on-the-ground conceptualizations of justice are complex and multifaceted. By the time the conceptions of justice we identified in the literature “hit the pews,” we see individual congregants espousing different mixtures of them. For example, survey findings clearly show that CRCNA members confirm that the aforementioned distinction between distributive and corrective justice (Wolterstorff 2008) is a place to start when thinking about justice in general, as their rough equivalents represent respectively the two most popular “definitions” in the survey. Perhaps this is not surprising given that this distinction has historical heft, being clearly articulated at least since Aristotle in the fourth century BC (Aristotle 2009: Book V, ch. 2).

Yet a variety of more contemporary articulations of justice were also present among research participants. For example, the more modern language of “equity” and “equality” were often used to convey contemporary notions of distributive justice. Likewise, respondents were sensitive to the language of “root causes” or “systemic barriers” with respect to social justice, adding the insight that a robust understanding of distributive justice must include some account of large-scale political and/or socio-economic structures. This systemic understanding of justice may lead some to be critical of such structures and work for systemic change—an approach typified in the Christian tradition by such figures as Wilberforce and King. In addition, many research participants also upheld notions of restoration and inclusion when thinking about justice, both concepts growing within the justice literature in recent years. Restorative justice presents an alternative approach to addressing wrongdoing, emphasizing the interconnected web of relationships that is broken when a wrong is done, seeking to repair those relationships and bring healing to all affected: victim, offender, and community (Zehr 2002). Notions of inclusion are associated with an understanding of procedural justice, emphasizing the importance of creating space for marginalized or oppressed groups to have an active role in decision-making processes over their lives (Skitka and Crosby 2003; Fondacaro and Weinberg 2002).

A melting pot of justice meaning therefore exists. Individual congregants combined a number of dominant conceptions of justice to form their own understanding of what justice is, both in theory and in practice. In so doing, hybrid conceptualizations emerged that were broad in scope yet conceptually vague, this vagueness being particularly evident through qualitative responses. While justice as a concept does in fact seem to *matter* to survey respondents, it is less clear what justice actually *means* in any sort of cohesive or distinct sense, especially for practical purposes.

Despite the conceptual vagueness among survey participants, there was nevertheless a strong emphasis on understanding justice from the perspective of Christian faith. Faith does seem to matter to survey respondents, or at least it seems to matter when trying to understand what justice means. Despite this consensus on the importance of faith, there was considerable latitude amongst participants about how best to understand the relationship between justice and Christian faith. For

example, some survey participants conflated justice with faithful Christian living or righteousness (e.g., “doing what is right before God.”). Others downplayed the importance of human action in affecting justice, agreeing with the statement that “God will take care of justice as God pleases; it is not my place to decide that for God.” While there was an expected bias toward the sovereignty of God, emphasizing God’s plan, will for, and power to act in the world (Christian Reformed Church 2009), the vast majority of respondents also affirmed their role as human agents with responsibility in doing justice.

But perhaps most striking is the ambiguity among CRCNA congregants about how important justice work should be relative to other Christian pursuits. While the vast majority of respondents considered justice to be an important, even necessary, aspect of their religious commitment, it was not the most important aspect. A variety of individualistic expressions of Christian piety and practice were seen to be more important, with the decidedly individualistic response, “Having and nurturing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as my Saviour” ranking as the most important to Christian faith. This lower ordering of justice relative to other aspects of Christian faith seems to impact action, which we explore in more detail in the “doing justice” section below.

Doing Justice

Although the survey results clearly show the importance of a biblical call to justice, our findings reveal that doing justice was not a central concern for most respondents. Strong affirmation (86 %) of the statement “being a Christian requires me to do justice” is matched by only 43 % who would place justice as a central concern in their Christian faith and life. What is more, most respondents not only placed justice outside their primary concerns but perceived their fellow congregants as prioritizing justice even less.

Why such a dramatic difference between the strong consensus that there is a requirement to do justice and the “optional” status implied by justice being a second (or lower) priority? What stops respondents from translating an articulated commitment to justice into action? Conversely, what would encourage and enable congregants to embrace justice as a central part of their Christian life? Our survey findings contribute insight into the individual, congregational, and societal factors that influence people of faith towards avoiding or embracing justice.

At the *individual* level, a major barrier to doing justice work appears to be the difficulty among congregants of translating an intellectual understanding of justice into real-world practical action. Justice was perceived as complex; or perhaps more accurately, as overly complex. Confusion over the meaning of the word “justice” and a lack of education about what justice meant or how to do it was identified as a barrier by a majority of respondents. A lack of intellectual clarity in understanding justice can inhibit critical analysis of real-world situations and prevent people from identifying injustice, discerning root causes of and responsibility for these injustices, or imagining more just alternatives and one’s possible role as an individual actor in realizing these alternatives, thus functioning as a barrier to doing justice despite a strongly articulated commitment. For example, Wolterstorff points

to problems that occur when equivocation occurs between justice and righteousness, which he claims are two different things: “Righteousness is a personal character trait; justice is a normative social condition. The righteous person is the one who has the personal character trait of righteousness. The just person is the one who struggles to bring about that normative social condition which is justice.” (see Wolterstorff 2006: 130). Given such examples of conceptual ambiguity and confusion, it is not surprising that the three most popular answers to the survey question on what would be helpful in working more for justice all relate to respondents’ felt need to better grasp the concept of justice (i.e., having a clearly articulated biblical vision of justice, being better educated about matters of justice and injustice, and having places/events where justice issues can be talked about openly).

Past research has demonstrated that *congregational* identity and culture also impacts justice prioritization and engagement. Factors previously identified include forming a community identity that includes doing justice, providing bridging capital to persons or organizations engaged in justice work, and undertaking justice-oriented programming (Todd and Allen 2011; Torres-Harding et al. 2013). These factors appear to be lacking in many CRCNA congregations. For example, survey respondents’ consistent perception that justice is a lower priority for fellow congregants than for themselves suggests that justice is not formed into congregational identity, or it is obscured. What is more, descriptions of the links between cause fatigue and a lack of support from one’s community are prominent amongst manuals for Christian activism (Wigg-Stevenson 2013; Cannon 2013). Although few respondents said they had met active resistance from fellow congregants, or that they felt alone in their congregation in caring about justice, more (i.e., greater than one-fifth of) congregants did report feeling unsupported by congregational leaders or experienced a lack of guidance on how to pursue justice. The net result was a general lack of awareness among congregants about how best to proceed with their justice intentions.

A key remedy to overcoming a lack of awareness about justice mobilization centered on experiences and relationships. Congregants needed opportunities to see or experience justice in action by observing or being part of the justice-building story together with others. Research in the field of social psychology indicates the importance of individual and group identity in considering what is fair or just in a given situation or context, in deciding to whom justice ought to be extended, and of what type or scale of justice is appropriate (Skitka and Crosby 2003). Furthermore, the role of empathy in justice decision-making and action (Hoffman 1989) illustrates the power of situations and relationships that foster empathic attachment for justice prioritization and action. These insights from the literature confirm the suggestion from our own results that reducing social and relational distance, and fostering empathic responses toward those who are experiencing injustice are indeed important facilitators of justice engagement within the congregational culture.

At the *societal* level, our survey results seem to be consistent with previous research that has found social and economic privilege to function as a barrier to justice engagement (Todd and Allen 2011). The demographic variables in our

survey and in previous research of CRCNA congregants (Rice et al. 2013) indicate that CRCNA congregations enjoy such privilege. Thus, we would expect lower justice engagement in a majority of congregations. A majority of survey participants confirmed that they are “not very exposed to people who experience injustice” and that this has served as a barrier to justice engagement. As mentioned above, respondents seemed to be aware of this dynamic, confirming that personal involvement with those who are experiencing injustice could serve as a facilitator to greater justice engagement.

Yet our findings point to another important barrier to justice mobilization. Survey results demonstrate that personal salvation (i.e., having a personal relationship with Jesus), personal piety (following God’s commandments and doing what is right; practising spiritual disciplines), and personal doctrinal adherence (believing the Bible and church teachings) are given precedence over doing justice (supporting efforts to identify and address systemic injustice). These responses suggest that CRCNA congregants tend to espouse an individualized, internalized, and spiritualized faith—a private faith—rather than a faith that prioritizes doing justice as a public endeavour (Volf 2011). Acknowledging the influence of broader Western society, several Christian leaders concerned with social justice have identified this individualistic tendency within recent evangelical and Reformed theology and church practice as an ideological obstacle to a deeper integration of Christian faith and action for justice (Haluza-Delay 2008; Goudzwaard 2002; Guder 2001).

Survey findings suggest that a key motivator for counter-acting the forces of individualism (and other barriers to justice) is a clearly articulated and biblically-based vision to pursue justice within a supportive Christian community. The importance of such a biblically-based vision is echoed in books such as Christopher Wright’s *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (2006) and Mae Elise Cannon’s *Just Spirituality: How Faith Practices Fuel Social Action* (2013). The variety of justice-related activities already in place within CRCNA congregations, the great desire to learn more about justice, and finally the desire to become more active in doing justice are three expressions of commitment among some in the CRCNA to biblically respond and engage in action for justice.

Conclusion

This article summarizes empirical evidence from a survey with randomly selected CRCNA members in Canada. We learned that the understandings of justice from “the CRCNA pew” are multifaceted even if conceptually vague. Yet justice is clearly understood as being connected to faith even if there is ambiguity as to how it fits into the spectrum of Christian life. There is subsequently a need to assist CRCNA congregants in translating their awareness of injustice and desire for justice into action.

To this end, survey results emphasize the importance of pairing a Christian vision for justice with opportunities to experience exemplars of justice work, as both form conduits to involvement in justice initiatives. On the one hand, perhaps stemming from the conceptual vagueness in understanding justice, respondents struggled (and

therefore yearned) to better understand *what* justice work is all about and *why* they should engage in it. On the other hand, and in synch with the Christian witness highlighted in the literature (Taylor 2010; Cannon 2013), respondents were more likely to engage in justice related activity if there are exemplars to follow (or join). In other words, people would embrace justice if they could observe the *how-to* of justice, and were given the opportunity to see and experience the transformation brought about by justice work.

These conclusions are based on perspectives from members of one Christian denomination in Canada. Further research could explore the extent to which these on-the-ground perspectives are shared across Christian and other faith traditions, and across world regions. For example, contextualizing perspectives about the pursuit of justice held within different political systems of government would illuminate a deeper complexity about how socio-political influences impact theological positions on justice. Doing so would create a fuller understanding of the connection between faith and justice which could further equip faith communities to build on their historical traditions and advance movements for progressive social change.

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