



JUSTICE FOR THE POOR

ACCI POSITIONAL PAPER ON POVERTY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Poverty is the denial of 3 billion people's equality and dignity; gifts freely given to them by God and outrageously stolen from them by man. It is the most unjust and pervasive social disease of our time.

Deuteronomy 15:11

*For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying
"You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and the poor in your land".*

Micah 6:8

Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.

God has called his church to be a voice speaking out against such widespread injustice and a remedy to the poverty it causes. We are called to live a counter-cultural life marked by justice, mercy, love, generosity, and selflessness. We are called to share of our resources to meet the needs of others, and as such we are called to loosen the chains of oppression for the poor.

INTRODUCTION

POVERTY: THE THEORETICAL LANDSCAPE WHAT IS POVERTY? HOW IS IT DEFINED AND BY WHOM?

Much of the mainstream discourse around poverty has been generated in the west, and has defined poverty through a Eurocentric cultural lens. Due to the west's orientation towards materialism and individualism, poverty has largely been characterised as an economic problem and has further been construed as an individual rather than a 'structural dilemma'. More specifically poverty has been defined as an inability to meet economic outputs, income thresholds and calorie consumption rates. Strategies to combat poverty have been focused on efforts to increase economic productivity and reduce the numbers of people living below these thresholds. International financial institutions have incentivised the expansion of global markets into developing countries, heralding the trickle down effect of free markets as the answer to global poverty. The non-profit sector has also traditionally focused on material and economic programs aimed at increasing household income and ensuring basic needs are met.

More recently several new tenets have been added to the debate; theories that broaden poverty beyond economics, to incorporate notions of human rights, human capabilities, and concepts such as voice, agency and empowerment. More inclusive frameworks have been argued for, that gives those living in poverty a voice to shape the debate. This has led to a revelation that poverty is as much a psychosocial experience of isolation, exclusion, loss of control and disempowerment as it is an inability to meet material and physical needs.

Researchers and anthropologists have added to the discourse by examining the historical and political causes of poverty, which create disadvantage and perpetuate inequality. This has led to a greater understanding that poverty is a political and a systemic issue, and has strong links to past and present injustices.

New indicators and strategies to combat poverty have emerged as the theoretical bases expanded, all of this leading to a potentially confusing landscape for those wishing to engage in poverty eradication in a meaningful and thoughtful way.

THE NEED TO STATE OUR POSITION

In light of the complex and often competing array of theories related to poverty, one can no longer assume a common understanding of poverty or what it means to outwork our Biblical mandate to 'care for the poor'. Therefore the purpose of developing this positional paper on poverty and social justice is firstly to locate the Australian Christian Church's perspective on poverty and social justice within these wider global debates, and secondly to create a shared framework to guide our movement's engagement with poverty and social justice related issues.

SECTION ONE: UNDERSTANDING POVERTY

POVERTY AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE: THE SYMPTOM AND THE CAUSE

Poverty is much more than living below an arbitrary economic line. It is experienced as multidimensional deprivation that spans across physical, economic, psychological and social domains. Poverty deprives people of their basic needs and rights such as food security, clean water, adequate shelter, education, basic health care and security. It deprives people of their dignity, self-worth and voice. It deprives people of their positive freedoms, meaningful choices and control over their own lives.

Proverbs 13: 23

There is abundant food in the field of the poor, but it is swept away by injustice.

Although poverty causes all of the above forms of deprivation, poverty itself is not a root cause. It is a symptom of a much deeper and more sinister social disease; social injustice. It is for this reason that this positional paper looks at poverty and social justice as inseparable issues, as we believe the various expressions of social injustice are the root causes of poverty.

POVERTY BEGINS WITH INEQUALITY

The pursuit of social justice is founded upon the belief in the equality of all people. We are equally created in God's image, equally fallen and equally offered redemption and salvation by grace through Jesus Christ. As an expression of our equal worth, God gifted us all with the inalienable right to life, dignity, value and meaningful participation in stewarding the earth God designed to sustain us all. He also designed us to exist in community; in relationships with each other, and for our relationships to reflect the equal worth we hold.

Ecclesiastes 5:8-9

If you see the extortion of the poor, or the perversion of justice and fairness in government, do not be astonished by the matter. For the high official is watched by a higher official and there are higher ones over them! The produce of the land is seized by all of them, even the king is served by the fields

Ezekiel 22:29

The people of the land have practised extortion and committed robbery. They have wronged the poor and needy; they have oppressed the foreigner who lives among them and denied them justice.

Injustice begins when God's creation order gives way to a false hierarchy of human worth, which is the basis of inequality. When inequality invades **systems and structures**, they become sites of partiality and injustice that favour the powerful over the powerless. Poverty results and the cycle is self-perpetuated.

When inequality invades **personal relationships**, we neglect our social responsibility to 'love our neighbour as ourselves' and we embrace self-seeking values such as individualism and wealth accumulation above meeting the needs of others wherever and in whomever we find them.

Social justice is therefore a Biblically mandated reason to reinstate structural justice and outwork our social responsibility to our neighbour. It is Micah 6:8 Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God. When we pursue social justice then we are addressing the root cause of poverty.

POVERTY IS A RELATIONAL CONSTRUCT

ISAIAH 3:12 (NET)

Oppressors treat my people cruelly; creditors rule over them. My people's leaders mislead them; they give them confusing direction.

Individuals and families feel the effects of poverty, but it is fundamentally not an individual issue. Poverty is a relational construct. In other words, it takes two to make poverty: the exploiter and the exploited, the powerful and the powerless, the consumer and producer, the rich and the poor. The unequal relationships that create and perpetuate poverty can be personal relationships, such as those between patrons and clients, employers and employees, a landowner and their tenants, a loan shark and a desperate family, or they can be relationships that are outworked in systems. These include legal systems, tax systems, economic systems, cultural systems, social service systems and political systems. In some cases systems are inherently designed to be partial towards those with wealth and power. In other cases injustice is not written into the system, but the practical outworking of the system is unjust. This is often the case when systems become corrupted, where participation is conditional upon one's ability to pay bribes or lean on powerful networks to access what is every citizen's legal right or entitlement. Poverty is a relational construct, therefore poverty alleviation must go beyond addressing the individual, and seek to bring restoration to the broken structural and personal relational sites that cause it.

SECTION TWO: OUR BIBLICAL MANDATE TO ADDRESS THE CAUSES OF POVERTY

PSALM 119: 2-3

How blessed are those who observe his rules, and seek him with all their hearts, who, moreover, do no wrong, but follow in his footsteps.

1 JOHN 2:6

The one who says he resides in God ought himself to walk just as Jesus walked.

MODELING OUR LIVES AFTER CHRIST

There are over 2000 verses in the Bible that speak to the issue of social justice. Jesus' life on earth exemplifies the clash between God's demand for social justice and the systemic social injustice so characteristic of humanity in its fallen state. Throughout the New Testament we see Jesus stand for social justice as He embraced those excluded on the basis of social status, gender, ethnicity and age; a powerful demonstration of impartiality and equality (John 4:5-42, Mark 1:40, Mark 10:13-15, Luke 7:36-39). We read of stories where He challenged oppressive systems and confronted powerful brokers of such systems including tax collectors, rulers, those with political power and spiritual authority (Matt 21:12, 23:13-15, Luke 19:1-10, Luke 6:1-11, Mark 12:13-17). He denounced cultural and religious practices that created barriers to people fulfilling the commandment to 'love our neighbour as ourselves' (Luke 13:10-17). He advocated on behalf of the poor and the oppressed to the point of equating meeting the needs of the poor with serving Christ himself (Matt 25:35-40).

Christ's life is a perfect model of pursuing social justice in a broken and corrupted world. The Bible implores us to be like Christ, putting the interests of others above our own (Philippians 2:2). We are to imitate Christ's self-sacrifice, compelled by God's love that dwells within us to act compassionately towards those in need (1 John 3:16-18). We are further called to resist blindly adopting the values and norms of the world, but to be transformed through the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). Christ is the embodied Word of God, and in our pursuit of social justice, his life is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.

UNPACKING SOCIAL JUSTICE

ISAIAH 10:1-2

Those who have enacted unjust policies are as good as dead, those who are always instituting unfair regulations, to keep the poor from getting fair treatment, and to deprive the oppressed among my people of justice, so that they can steal what widows own and loot what belongs to orphans.

SOCIAL JUSTICE = STRUCTURAL JUSTICE + SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Structural justice is ensuring that the structures and systems that govern at all levels, local and global, are fair, impartial, accessible to all, and do not violate the rights or dignity of less powerful populations in order to protect the interests of the elite (Lev 9:15, Deut 1:17, Proverbs 31:9, 22:2, 29:7). Structural justice also includes ensuring that there are adequate social safety nets to protect the most vulnerable members of society from the loss of their basic rights and dignity (Lev 19:10, 23:22).

In Isaiah 58 the Bible draws explicit links between true religion and social ethics, and whilst leaders and rulers have a heightened obligation to uphold structural justice for the disadvantaged (Proverbs 31 4-5, 8-9), it is the responsibility of every Christian to act justly, and advocate for justice as evidence of our faith and our separation from the defiled and self-seeking values of the world (Isaiah 1:17, James 1:26-27).

PROVERBS 3:27-28

Do not withhold good from those who need it, when you have the ability to help. Do not say to your neighbour, "Go! Return tomorrow and I will give it", when you have it with you at the time.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY is recognising our personal responsibility to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:31). The parable of the Good Samaritan demonstrates that this love for our neighbour requires us to break down the socially constructed categories of 'us' and 'them' to meet the needs of others, wherever and in whomever we find them, even if it comes at a cost to us. Roman 13:10 'Love does no harm to a neighbour' further defines our social responsibility towards others as going beyond meeting needs to proactively avoiding any actions or decisions that can cause our neighbor harm. Therefore social responsibility is outworked through the twin actions of giving of ourselves - our resources, time, efforts, and energy for the sake of others, and tempering our self interests- our lifestyle, our decisions and actions where they intentionally or inadvertently cause others harm.

Proverbs 16:8

Better to have a little with righteousness than to have abundant income without justice.

SECTION THREE: HOW DO WE RESPOND TO POVERTY?

LOCATING THE FIGHT

PROVERBS 29:7

The righteous person cares for the legal rights of the poor; the wicked does not understand such knowledge.

ISAIAH 3:14

It is you who have ruined the vineyards! You have stashed in your houses what you have stolen from the poor.

Progress towards eradicating global poverty will require significant change to our social structures and the value systems that influence our day-to-day behaviour. Without such change, gains made by the poor through the acquisition and transfer of resource cannot be sustained because they remain exposed and vulnerable to global forces and systems that are unjust, inequitable, exploitative and designed to favour those with wealth and power. In this environment their experience of poverty becomes elastic and they are likely to dip in and out of poverty over the course of their life. It is for this reason that social justice attacks the roots of poverty - it calls the systems and structures that perpetuate injustice and poverty to account, whilst simultaneously awakening people to their social responsibility to meet the needs of others, and as such share the wealth of our planet more equitably. It challenges the deeply embedded values of extreme individualism and consumerism that have crippled our ability to intrinsically understand and outwork our social responsibility. It challenges the culture of wealth hoarding and entitlement, which has led to the 80 richest people in the world owning as much wealth as the poorest 50% (3.6 billion people).

At its core poverty is an issue of equality and justice. An aspect of fighting poverty is embracing people living in poverty as people of equal value and worth. It is shifting how we view people living in poverty from objects of our charity to people with legitimate claims to human rights and dignity. When we view people living in poverty this way, giving to meet their needs becomes a responsibility, rather than an optional act of charity.

2 COR 8:9

For I do not say this so there would be relief for others and suffering for you, but as a matter of equality. At the present time, your abundance will meet their need, so that one day their abundance may also meet your need, and thus there may be equality. "As it is written, the one who gathered much did not have too much and the one who gathered little did not have too little".

THE DISTINCTIVE OF THE SPIRIT

GAL 3:27-28

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

As Pentecostals, there is a Spirit inspired aspect to our engagement with issues of inequality and the injustice and poverty that results. Firstly the outpouring of the Spirit is in itself a profoundly democratizing work. In Galatians 3:27-28 Paul demonstrates that with baptism in the Spirit comes the dismantling of hierarchies of worth based on gender, race, wealth or any other socially constructed class. A new human community is established in which all cultural and social prejudices are nullified and members are made equal. In the early church of Acts this radical equality was evident in the structures of the church, the reciprocity demonstrated in community life and the engagement of the body with broader humanity. Today, as the Spirit guides us to outwork this deep commitment to equality in our churches, our communities and in our daily worshipful lives, we demonstrate the values of the New Kingdom and participate with Christ in ushering it in.

Secondly the Spirit is purposed to equip believers to outwork the social and spiritual implications of the gospel in a fallen and unjust world. Christ himself proclaimed this purposeful anointing when he publically launched his mission as recorded in **Luke chapter 4:18-19**

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the regaining of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

HOW WE SEEK TO FIGHT POVERTY AND INJUSTICE

Our Pentecostal Christian beliefs and understanding of poverty leads us to engage in the eradication of poverty and all forms of injustice through the following means.

1. WE BELIEVE IN THE PRINCIPLES OF SUBSIDIARITY AND EMPOWERMENT.

We engage with local people and communities in empowering relationships. We seek to address the psychological aspects of poverty by ensuring local people are the primary agents in determining the course and nature of their development.

We believe that decisions affecting the community should be made by the lowest competent authority- the local community themselves. As such we create opportunities for community consultation and consensus building, out of which needs identification and development planning flows.

2. WE BELIEVE IN MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

We believe that those living in poverty are not passive recipients of charity, but active participants whose collective skills, ideas and assets can effect significant change in their communities and lives.

We also believe that meaningful participation for the non-poor in the global fight against poverty extends beyond their giving, to the change they effect in their own lives, cultures and societies. This is critical in addressing the role overconsumption and individualism plays in global poverty.

3. WE BELIEVE IN INCLUSIVE APPROACHES

We believe that a strong community is a unified one, where all are invited to participate. Therefore we seek to build community, and break down all forms of social exclusion and encourage embrace.

4. WE SUPPORT OVERSEAS AND LOCAL EFFORTS

Poverty is a global issue and through our individual churches and national departments we engage in the fight against poverty on domestic and international platforms. We encourage each local church to be salt and light to the community around them, as well as creating opportunities for collective engagement in through our movement's Community Engagement and Missions and Development departments.

5. WE BELIEVE IN HOLISM

We believe in the holistic reconciliation of all things to Christ, which brings peace, the opposite of poverty. As such we seek to see people reconciled to God, each other, creation and themselves. Such reconciliation has the power to mend the broken structural and personal relationships that create and sustain poverty.

6. WE LEAD PEOPLE TO GOD

Salvation and discipleship brings true and lasting transformation and leads to the renewing of our minds, hearts and values.

7. WE ADVOCATE ON BEHALF OF THOSE LIVING IN POVERTY

We seek to be a prophetic voice speaking out against unjust systems, oppressive power and wealth disparity. We seek to raise awareness and lead people on thoughtful, reflective evaluations that precede change.

We believe in prayer, as a form of advocacy for the marginalized and for those living in poverty. We petition God who is their provider, their saviour and their redeemer, to bring about change in our world and to see His justice reign.

8. WE SEEK LASTING CHANGE

We recognise that we have limited resources in contrast to the enormous scale of poverty and injustice. Therefore we need to steward the resources we do have to achieve the most effective and sustainable impacts. This can only happen when thorough research and analysis of root causes and chains of causality informs our method of engagement.

9. WE BELIEVE IN PROPORTIONAL RESPONSE

Where issues are contained to a given local community, a proportional response would similarly be contained, but where issues are global, a global response is required. To this end we believe in joining with the broader Body of Christ, the global church and likeminded organisations, to participate in global efforts to combat poverty and injustice.

10. WE BELIEVE IN THE ANOINTING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

We depend on the Holy Spirit's guidance and equipping of believers to proclaim the good news to the poor, through our words, actions, advocacy, generosity and acts of solidarity.

LUKE 4: 18-19

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the regaining of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.