

What is Social Justice?

© Sandie Cornish, July 2006.

Sharing in the Common Good

Justice is about fairness. Social justice in particular concerns the relationships between different groups in society. It examines whether all the groups in society receive what is due to them in fairness or not.

In a just society the needs, interests or perspectives of some groups are not privileged while those of others are neglected. To see if our society is just, we need to examine how the processes and institutions of our society operate, how we allocate resources, and how power and privilege are distributed. We need to look at the economic, social, cultural and political systems of our society. Concern for social justice leads us to ask: Do all of these systems result in every group in our society receiving what is due to them in fairness?

Work for social justice is essentially about respecting human dignity and promoting the common good. We are not just isolated individuals. We live in a network of relationships – with ourselves, others, creation, and God. We have a responsibility to care for each other and so we should work towards a society which ensures that every person and every group is able to meet their needs, and to realize their potential.

Every group in society should take into account the rights and aspirations of other groups, and the well being of the whole human family, rather than just looking out for itself.

All of us, no matter what our age, gender, ethnicity, political stance or religious beliefs, should be able to live in a dignified manner.

To Love & Serve

Service and social justice are deeply interrelated. In a truly Christian response, justice and charity embrace, just as faith and good works go together. This is why schools and parishes often talk about social outreach in a way that combines service and work for justice.

Responding to the immediate needs of people and groups is one of the most basic ways in which we give practical expression to God's love in our relationships with others. If our work for social justice is inspired by love, we cannot ignore the immediate needs of people while calmly analyzing issues.

Sometimes, however, our direct service responses can seem like putting a band aid over a deep wound. To

build a more just society it is necessary to deal with causes as well as treating symptoms. We ask why people are hungry as well as sharing food with them. We explore what needs to change so that everyone can meet their needs. Our methods will be consistent with our values: they should promote human dignity, freedom and responsibility. Working for a more just society calls for mutuality and solidarity in relationships between groups in society rather than dependency and paternalism.

The call to a faith that does justice invites us to accompany, serve and plead the cause of those people and groups who are made poor or pushed to the margins. We are called to live in right relationship with others, to love and serve our neighbours. Treating people and groups in society fairly is the minimum that we should do!

For Discussion

- Identify any groups in your community whose needs, interests and perspectives are neglected. How might you respond?
- How do you understand the common good?
- Imagine what it would be like to be in right relationship with yourself, others, creation, and with God. Try to describe what it would look, sound and feel like.