

# Justice meets evangelism



**PUBLIC WITNESS:** Members of South Presbyterian Church in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., built a combination prayer labyrinth and organic garden on the church's front lawn—a symbol of ministry to both body and spirit.

**Presbyterians are rediscovering the importance of both proclaiming and living out the gospel.**

By Paul Seebeck

**D**o you love Jesus or the social gospel?"

The people standing in line to greet me after worship were waiting for my answer. I had recently become pastor of a church in eastern Washington, after 20 years as a broadcast journalist who felt called to be a voice for the afflicted and a vexation to the powerful. Now I was being asked to make a choice that I hadn't had to make in the secular world.

## **Saving souls and filling bellies**

The Presbyterian Church has a long history of affirming that both evangelism and justice are essential parts of the Christian witness. Both are included in the Great Ends of the Church in the PC(USA) Constitution. Yet somehow over the years justice

and evangelism became separated. Proponents of winning converts were suspicious of the "social gospel." Advocates of justice felt uncomfortable talking about Jesus. Now, however, there appears to be a new convergence of justice and evangelism, as Presbyterians and other Christians rediscover the importance of both proclaiming and living out the gospel.

Hunter Farrell, director of World Mission for the PC(USA), believes that this convergence is one of the most exciting things happening in the church today. Yet he acknowledges that it can be scary when justice and evangelism meet. "The divide has allowed us to live in comfort in a time when the gap that separates the rich and poor increases. We have to confront the

fact that we are members of one of the richest per capita churches in the most powerful country in the world." At the same time, he adds, we are part of the body of Christ, along with many of the world's poorest people.

Joseph Johnson, pastor of Evergreen Presbyterian Church in Dothan, Ala., remembers visiting his grandparents in strife-torn Birmingham in the 1960s and sensing a disconnect between the poverty and racial injustice on the streets and the messages he was hearing in churches.

"In our culture, we've separated justice and evangelism into two disciplines—one about saving souls, the other about filling bellies," he says. "But the way I read Scripture, people didn't follow Jesus just because he promised them eternal life, but



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because he promised them life today.” Jesus gave people hope by breaking down social barriers, by healing and feeding them, Johnson says. “Evangelism should be an invitation to follow Jesus along this path.”

Johnson is trying to unite justice and evangelism in his own ministry and in the life of his congregation. He serves on the PC(USA)'s National Committee on the Self-Development of People, which gives grants that empower groups seeking to change the structures that perpetuate poverty, oppression and injustice. Evergreen Presbyterian Church's food pantry gives out 64,000 pounds of food a year, serving an average of 45 families per week. The church also offers financial assistance to people struggling to pay their bills.

“We're trying to penetrate the systems that create injustice,” says Johnson, who is working with other faith leaders to address the systemic causes of poverty in their community. “The plan is to work with particular families and through mentoring, networking and training assist them in moving from a life of dependency toward a life of self-sufficiency.”

### Overseas witness

Some of the earliest Presbyterian missionaries demonstrated a strong commitment to both evangelism and justice. William and Lucy Sheppard, for example, who helped bring the gospel to the Congo in the late 19th century, were among the first to work to end the atrocities condoned by the country's colonial rulers. The regime of Belgium's King Leopold II enslaved Congolese villagers to work in the booming rubber industry and brutally punished them—even cutting off the hands of those who didn't meet their quotas.

“Some churches don't see the contradiction of sharing the good news of Jesus in a context of gross injustice without addressing the injustice,” says Farrell. “Our mission workers from the beginning said ‘no.’”

Today, both evangelism and justice are central to the work of Presbyterian World Mission. The church's mission around the world is guided by three “critical global issues” identified by partner churches: (1) addressing the root causes of poverty, especially as it impacts women and children, (2) sharing the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ and (3) working for reconciliation in cultures of violence, including our own.

“These are helping us return to a more holistic understanding of the gospel,” Farrell says.



**HELPING HANDS:** Volunteers sort donations for the food pantry at Evergreen Presbyterian Church in Dothan, Ala. Church leaders are also working to address the systemic causes of poverty in their community.



**OUTREACH TO STRUGGLING FAMILIES:** Sue Register and Larry Hammond help bag food at Evergreen Presbyterian's food pantry.



**SHARING THE LOAD:** Mike Goodman helps a client with groceries at the Evergreen food pantry, which serves an average of 45 families per week. The church also offers assistance to people unable to pay their bills.

PHOTOS BY MARCY GOSSELIN



**THE TWO WINGS OF THE GOSPEL:** The wings of this giant bird sculpture on the grounds of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus represent evangelism, or proclaiming the gospel, and justice, or living the gospel. Like the bird, the church needs both wings in order to fly.

Such an understanding of the gospel characterizes the witness of partner churches of the PC(USA), including the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, one of the fastest growing churches in the world. On a visit to Ethiopia last year, Linda Valentine, executive director of the PC(USA)'s General Assembly Mission Council, was drawn to a sculpture of a giant bird

on the grounds of church facilities. She was told that one of the bird's wings represents evangelism, or proclaiming the gospel, and the other wing stands for justice, or living the gospel.

"This church in Ethiopia has had such a profound impact on the world through outreach and service," says Valentine. "It was a profound reminder to me of what we can do

together. With the Holy Spirit at the center of both wings, the church can fly."

### Finding new language

An influx of younger pastors is helping restore the balance between evangelism and justice in New York's Hudson River Presbytery, says General Presbyter Susan Andrews.

"We now have 16 younger pastors who are progressive in terms of justice and social issues and passionate about a biblically-based understanding of the church and making Jesus part of that commitment," she says. "It's natural for them to talk about Jesus."

The new pastors' evangelical vocabulary made some of the older church members uncomfortable. So Andrews invited more than 100 people in the presbytery to talk and listen to one another, in hopes of coming up with language that would strengthen rather than divide their witness. People in the presbytery are beginning to understand that evangelism and justice are "two sides of the same coin," says Andrews.

## 'Jesus cannot be divided'

By Johnnie Monroe

For years, there has existed in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) a division between ministries of evangelism and social justice. Some say the main reason for the church's existence is to win souls for Jesus Christ and to prepare people to go to heaven. They say the church should not be concerned about politics or about advocacy for poor people, racial minorities, children and the elderly. Leave that outside the church.

Others say the church must be involved in social justice; the church should be present wherever people are suffering. Is that not what the prophets preached and should not the church be prophetic? Is that not also part of the teachings of Jesus Christ?

I believe that there is no either-or; the church must be involved in both evangelism and social witness. In Matthew 28:16–20, Jesus charges the disciples to go and make disciples. In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus talks about ministering to people in need—the sick, the prisoners, the hungry and thirsty. After giving the disciples some on-the-job training, Jesus tells them to go and practice what they have learned—by making disciples. He also tells them to meet human needs, with the understanding that once those needs are met, people will be empowered to change their environment and to be salt and light for the world.

Both of these charges come from Jesus Christ, our leader and our guide. Jesus cannot be divided.



**JOHNNIE MONROE**, a retired Presbyterian minister and member of Pittsburgh Presbytery, serves on the PC(USA)'s National Committee on the Self-Development of People.



**'If you take Jesus' call to love one another and love the world seriously, then spirituality and social justice have to go hand in hand.'— Susan DeGeorge**

"Younger people are bringing an inner spiritual expression that includes a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and that gets expressed in social justice and living out faith in the world."

Susan G. DeGeorge, associate pastor of South Presbyterian Church in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., says she doesn't understand why some people assume that if you're involved in justice, you have no need for Jesus or spirituality. "In fact, our push for justice at South Presbyterian is based on who we think Christ is, and what Christ wants us to be and do," she says. "It's very Reformed. We want to follow Calvin's tradition of helping to build God's kingdom on earth."

Last year church members built a combination prayer labyrinth and organic garden on the church's front lawn—a symbol of ministry to both body and spirit. "By placing our labyrinth garden in one of the most public places in Dobbs Ferry, we are reaching out to those in our community who are not interested in church," says DeGeorge. "If you take Jesus' call to love one another and love the world seriously, then spirituality and social justice have to go hand in hand."

In Los Angeles, a focus on justice as well as evangelism helped 31-year-old Nick Warnes successfully organize a new Presbyterian congregation in a place where other church planters had failed. Northland Village Church is located in a diverse neighborhood where residents, for the most part, are indifferent if not hostile toward organized religion. One way that Warnes gained the trust of people in the neighborhood was by working with some of them to correct an injustice in the distribution of school funding.

"Many told us it would be impossible to plant Northland Village here, because they would not

welcome us," says Warnes. "Other churches came in as heroes trying to save the pagans. We recognized the kingdom of heaven was already here; we wanted to join in with what God was doing, becoming agents of reconciliation."

Reuniting evangelism and justice could help the church reach a new generation of college students, says Andrea Saccoccio, associate pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle.

"At their core, students care about justice, but they don't know Jesus is relevant to the topic," she says of the students she's met at the nearby University of Washington. "There's also a huge segment in the Christian culture that doesn't know Jesus spoke about justice."

In a previous job with International Justice Mission in Washington, D.C., Saccoccio provided resources on justice to leaders of parachurch ministries such as

Campus Crusade and InterVarsity. "Some were aware of a hole in their gospel presentation," she says. They told her, "You Presbyterians can help us talk about Jesus and justice."

### **The right question**

"Jesus or the social gospel?" When confronted with that choice in my first year of ministry, my first response was to laugh out loud. "That's the wrong question," I remember saying.

And what is the right question? Now, as then, the words of Micah 6:8 run through my mind: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

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### **LEARN MORE about justice and evangelism**

- » *Engage*, a new resource from the PC(USA)'s office of Evangelism, is designed to help Presbyterians connect faith sharing and justice in their Christian discipleship. To watch a short video about *Engage* and to download the materials: [www.pcusa.org/evangelism](http://www.pcusa.org/evangelism)
- » *Unbound: An Interactive Journal of Christian Social Justice*, a new online resource published by the PC(USA)'s Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy for people interested in the connection between justice and Jesus (succeeding the former print journal *Church & Society*): [www.justiceunbound.org](http://www.justiceunbound.org)
- » To read about the three critical global issues that guide the work of Presbyterian World Mission: [www.pcusa.org/worldmission](http://www.pcusa.org/worldmission)
- » To watch a short video featuring Yonas Yigezu, director of mission and theology for the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus: [www.pcusa.org/changing-lives-ethiopia](http://www.pcusa.org/changing-lives-ethiopia)
- » To learn more about the PC(USA)'s National Committee on the Self-Development of People: [www.pcusa.org/sdop](http://www.pcusa.org/sdop)