

Transforming Communities through Active Compassion, Mercy and Justice Ministries (& Women Ministries)

Introduction

Compassion, mercy, and justice are at the heart of the mission of God the Father, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and incarnated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Participation in the mission of Jesus Christ is meaningful, however, only to the extent to which we understand the reality of sin. Human sin is at the root of the brokenness in the world. By their very nature, ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice seek to address sin in the world. The effects of sin are complex and pervasive and culminate in the suffering of Jesus on the cross as he took upon himself the sins of the world. In addressing God's call to compassion, mercy, and justice we recognize our own sinfulness and the sin of the world with deep grief and humility. Our work, flawed as it is, is founded on God's work, the redemption, reconciliation, and restoration of God in Christ. The Christ event—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—is the decisive act of compassion, mercy, and justice in our world.

Compassion, mercy, and justice—all three express essential characteristics of God's nature and God's call to us. As we explore the Bible, we find that compassion, mercy, and justice are inseparable. Their meanings are woven together, belong together, and illuminate each other. One without the others truncates and limits the work of God in our world. They should be viewed as a unified whole.¹

Statistics

Did you know that...?

Hunger: We live in the world's wealthiest nation. Yet 14.5 percent of U.S. households—nearly 49 million Americans, including 16.2 million children—struggle to put food on the table.

(<http://www.bread.org/hunger/us/>)

Domestic Violence: Every 15 seconds a woman is battered; 3 or more women each day are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends. (<http://www.covchurch.org/abuse/files/2010/09/WHY-AVA-EXISTS-final1.pdf>)

Juvenile Justice: Nearly 3000 children nationwide have been sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. Children as young as 13 years old have been tried as adults and sentenced to die in prison. (<http://ejj.org/childrenprison>)

¹ Some information is used from the Covenant Resource Paper, "The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Ministry of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice," 2011.

Mass Incarceration and Race: 7,328,200 reflects 1 in every 31 adults under correctional control, i.e., in prison, jails, on probation, etc., (<http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/>). More than 60% of the people in prison are now racial and ethnic minorities. For Black males in their thirties, 1 in every 10 is in prison or jail on any given day...two-thirds of all persons in prison for drug offenses are people of color. (www.sentencingproject.org)

Human Trafficking: Twenty-seven million people are in some form of slavery today as commercial sex slaves, forced laborers, or child soldiers. Twelve and a half million people are victims of forced labor worldwide with two and a half million as a result of human trafficking. According to the State Department, 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders worldwide every year. Fifty percent of these people are children, 80% are female, and the majority is trafficked for sexual exploitation. (<http://www.covchurch.org/trafficking/definition/>)

Two Key Scripture Passages

Matthew 25:35-40: Why do you think Jesus chose these particular “situations” to describe “the least of these”? When have you encountered one of “the least of these”? Describe that encounter and your response. What places in your community are these kinds of works needed?

Micah 6:8: In response to Isaiah’s question, “What does the Lord require?” how is that lived out in your own life? What does “doing right” or “doing justice” look like in the community where your church is planted? How do you understand the connection between Micah 6:8 and Matthew 25:35-40? How does the church do them both?

Christ Point

In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus boldly announced his mission: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus announced good news for the whole world, with particular attention to the poor, the captive, the incapacitated, and the oppressed. Jesus persistently allied himself with untouchables as well as the voiceless. In both word and deed, he attacked discrimination against lepers, Gentiles, Samaritans, tax collectors, shepherds, women, and children. In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus condemned those who showed the poor neither compassion nor mercy (Luke 16:19-31). When the disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the expected Messiah, he replied, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Luke 7:22).

When asked by a teacher of the law, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” Jesus answered, “The most important one...is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:28-31). Along with Luke 4:18-19, this text provides clarity about the foundation for ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice and intimately links love for God with love for neighbor,² evidenced through the life and mission of Christ.

The Key Question

How do compassion, mercy and justice fit into the full mission of the Gospel and lived out in ways that lead to transforming the local community?

How is the full mission of God demonstrated in local communities through ministries of compassion, mercy and justice?

How does our understanding of a full gospel compel us (the church) to holistically live out the mission of God that would result in transformed communities?

Prayer

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*³

Church History Perspective

Throughout the history of Christianity, believers have concerned themselves with the downtrodden, weak and poor. The biblical example in Acts 6 models the distribution of food to widows and the establishment of deacons, both indicative of compassion, mercy and justice. Jesus proclaims His mission

² Ibid.

³ From *The (Online) Book of Common Prayer*, 1979; www.bcponline.org

in Luke 4: “to proclaim the good news to the poor,...to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free...” Likewise, this becomes the mission of the church evident in outreach ministries like hospitals, homes for the elderly and infirmed, soup kitchens, and drug treatment centers, and the centuries-long, ever-changing movement to abolish slavery in its many forms. The church has been charged with prophetically calling out the brokenness and injustice in our world and has engaged with issues of compassion, mercy, and justice with varying degrees of success. Like the early church, we are called to a holistic approach to ministry, both in word and deed. Yet, in a growing world of political divisiveness, the church has oftentimes shied away from social justice concerns.

Covenant History Perspective

In recent years, the Evangelical Covenant Church’s engagement in these ministries has increased, deepened, and broadened, reflecting our deepening conviction that to be faithful to the Bible, the Covenant Church must work to live out the great commandment in all its ramifications.

From its inception the Covenant has cared about ministering to hurting people. In 1886, the year after the church’s founding, delegates gathered to chart direction in mission. One of the first decisions was to establish the Home of Mercy to care for the sick, elderly, and orphaned. Today a network of hospitals, retirement communities, enabling residences for developmentally disabled adults, and other community services for at-risk women and children exists throughout the ECC.

Soon after the Covenant’s founding, the first Covenant missionaries ventured to the territory now known as western Alaska. While preaching the gospel, they also established schools, clinics, and orphanages. This set in motion what is today an expansive global effort that partners with national leadership on five continents to provide education, health care, economic development, clean water, agricultural sustainability, disaster relief, and initiatives such as combating human trafficking.

Throughout our history, the Covenant Church has been silent on matters such as suffrage and Jim Crow laws, and too quiet on many such as civil rights. As the children and grandchildren of the immigrant generation that founded the Covenant settled more fully into the North American experience, memories and sensitivities toward the hardship of newer immigrants were sometimes lost. Concern about poverty and its accompanying issues were not always understood as central to God’s call.

In Christ we dare to say at our best we desire to be people who are evangelistic, compassionate, merciful, and just. Yet we confess that we consistently fail to share the good news, act out of compassion, demonstrate mercy, and advocate for justice. We repent, desiring to grow more and more

into the kind of people we aspire to be as followers of Jesus Christ. Thankfully God does not give up on us, and so we continue with renewed vibrancy to live fully into the call of the whole mission of God.⁴

Caring for the “other” is a part of the DNA of the Covenant Church, and its power to transform is still a resource with great potential.

Ten Suggestions to Move Forward

1. Launch a sermon series on compassion, mercy and justice.
2. Host a small group study using the Covenant Resource Paper and accompanying video curriculum.
3. Advocate for those who have little or no voice in repairing their brokenness to elected officials and others who are responsible for making systemic changes.
4. Identify issues within the community and educate the church collectively and individually on these issues of concern.
5. Read together *The Hole in Our Gospel* by Rich Stearns—small groups, Bible Studies, Sunday School classes can discuss together and provide feedback to the whole. Consider other books mentioned below.
6. Develop a team! Evaluate the skills of those in your congregation and identify key individuals who have deep concern as well as those currently serving in areas of need, e.g., teachers, medical personnel, law enforcement officers, social service agency workers, etc.
7. Assess the needs in your community. Census figures, law enforcement outreach officers, social workers, government leaders, and simple observation in the community can all help draw the picture of where needs are.
8. Acquaint yourselves with what is currently being done to help on the local, regional and global scales to address the concerns you identify with the most.
9. Consider partnering with a church in another part of your community as you address needs. Recognize the value of partnering with a congregation that is of a different ethnic or cultural background from yours.
10. Review the resources available on CovChurch.org to learn where and how the Covenant is serving, remembering that a great variety of needs are being addressed by multiple entities. If you do not find what you need, call 773-784-3000 with a specific inquiry.
11. Determine if you can partner with others to bring help and change, resisting the temptation to start something new. If someone is already serving in an area you are called to address, join them and pool resources.
12. Develop a prayer team to support your efforts; consider regular prayer walks in neighborhoods where there is need; visit community-based ministries and pray for and with them; provide the

⁴ Covenant Resource Paper, “The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Ministry of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice,” 2011.

entire congregation with regular prayer concerns of your congregation's CMJ efforts; post answers to prayer regularly.

13. Invite a community-based leader from a local ministry or outreach effort to address the congregation or other smaller groups.
14. Invite a guest speaker from the E.C.C. to address the problems you've identified. Compassion Mercy and Justice, Women Ministries, Covenant World Relief, Paul Carlson Partnership, Covenant Ministries of Benevolence, Covenant Institutions of Care, and Covenant World Mission have deep resources and effective ministries of CMJ.
15. Consider hosting a forum for your area at which ministries and agencies are welcome to display and discuss their approach to an issue or issues in your community. Provide opportunities for local and global engagement; invite a guest speaker to preach; include prayer in your effort.

Five to Seven Challenges to Address

1. **Sin:** human sin is at the root of the brokenness in the world. The effects of sin are complex and pervasive and culminate in the suffering of Jesus on the cross as he took upon himself the sins of the world.⁵ We not only must acknowledge our own sinfulness, but recognize how decisions and our comforts may even be contributors to the pain and suffering of others.
2. **Lack of a common humanity:** Genesis 1:26-27 declares that all humanity is created in God's image, with no exceptions. This biblical fact alone affirms an identity of humanity that commands dignity and respect for every image-bearer of God. Yet, a fallen creation corrupted by sin set the wheels in motion for the collapse of all that God had made perfect, reflected in the societal and systemic ills we see today. The poor, the immigrant, the racially-different, the "thug," the homeless, the incarcerated – are still bearers of God's image, yet are treated with less dignity and respect.
3. **Absence of a prophetic voice:** scripture is replete with the cries of the prophets for God's people to "do right." The voices of Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and more confronted the people to love mercy and do justice; to care for the widows, the orphans, the oppressed, the exploited. Although Christ was the fulfillment of the words of the prophets and completely embodies compassion, mercy and justice, the church still falls short of carrying forth the incarnate Christ into all the world. The same passionate plea of the prophets and then of Christ must be the church's as well.
4. **Issues are Political:** the brokenness within our society is apparent, seen particularly in the increasing contentiousness in the political realm. There would be those who would argue that the social ills are for the government to fix, yet we deny our Christ call to

⁵ Ibid.

holistic mission as reflected in Luke 4: 18-19. In other words, our relinquishment to the political arena says that it's not the job of the church to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, cloth the homeless and visit the prisoner (we don't struggle so much with visiting the sick). Some believe the sole mission of the church is to proclaim the Gospel. Not only did Christ give us ways that we are to demonstrate Christ "to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine," but the Old Testament prophet Micah tells us to "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God."

5. **Passivity:** if it's not in our purview, then more than likely we're numb, unaware or just plain passive about attending to injustice. It's easy to live in a homogeneous, well-to-do community and fail to look beyond ones surroundings to see the brokenness that clearly exist. In our own spheres of comfort, good-hearted Christians have often been oblivious to the marginalization and disenfranchisement of others.
6. **Fear, Xenophobia and Racial barriers:** social and political constructs have created an "us" and "them" mentality in society. We are afraid of those who are unlike us; we are persuaded by a variety of sources to understand the "other" through stereotypes; and we fear those who are different. We have reconstructed the "dividing walls of hostility" that Christ destroyed (Ephesians 2:14) and continue to fortify them to ensure our "protection." We proclaim the kingdom vision in Revelations 7:9 that every nation, tribe, people and language will bow before the throne, yet fall short of Jesus' prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

Relationship to Other Markers (2 paragraphs showing the link with a few other markers)

There can be no authentic transformation of communities without active ministries of compassion, mercy and justice in isolation of the other markers. Moving forward with ministries of CMJ is one of the best ways to get faith to move from head to heart to action; moving people out of their comfort levels causes a deeper dependence on God and strengthens community. Just as awareness of needs in our own area can raise awareness of needs globally, so can a congregation that addresses global needs become aware of needs locally, creating a powerful synergy of resources and a culture of activism.

As a congregation celebrates what God is doing in and through their efforts, God is glorified in worship and others can be encouraged and inspired to engage further and more deeply. It is often when people are dialed in to the needs around them that they are motivated to give sacrificially to address or alleviate those needs. Focusing on one effort together has power to unify and empower as risks are taken, victories are celebrated and new steps are taken. This also provides great opportunity for the development of new and current leaders—opportunities previously untried now allow some to shine whose gifts had been as yet untapped. Ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice have great potential to bring health and vitality to a congregation as their sights are lifted from themselves to the greater good and the advancement of God's Kingdom.

Relationship to the Mission Priorities

Transforming ministries of compassion, mercy and justice are fundamentally connected to all of the mission priorities without exception. Developing leaders for the church would be severely truncated if there was no connection, relationship or understanding of loving mercy and doing justice, as would starting and strengthening churches and making and deepening disciples. For the mission priority of serving globally, unknown and oftentimes unaware of mindsets of paternalism and colonialism, the relationships with loving mercy and doing justice would eliminate seeing “the other” as “less than.” Dignity and respect is offered to those we are called to serve as the church does outreach for the purpose of transforming communities.

Case Study

Contented Covenant Church is in a transitional suburban area of a large city. As its members watch the neighborhood change around them, some propose that they consider a move to a “safer” area. Others ask about trying to do something for “those people” who need help. A women’s Bible study group has been reading books about the power of one person to influence those around them by addressing needs. In the midst of this, Pastor Purdy preached a series of messages on Matthew 25: 31-46, and shortly thereafter, a local woman and her child are killed in an incident of domestic violence.

Myla Rand has been a member of Contented Covenant for four years and is a police officer in the community. She and her partner were called to the home of the abuse victims and were the first to see the bodies. The news media arrived shortly thereafter and aired statements of neighbors expressing the usual shock and dismay over the deaths. “You hear about these things on TV, but you never think it will happen in your neighborhood,” said one. Another opined, “This is terrible. I think it might be time to get my family out of this neighborhood. I don’t want my kids to be surrounded by things like this.” Officer Rand was called upon to talk with the two remaining children in the home, and to transport them into the custody of child protective services. Her partner took statements from neighbors seeking to determine if the abuse was ongoing or a new development.

Two weeks later, Officer Rand was at her Bible study when one of the members asked her about the killings. “Is this the first time something like this has happened here?” she was asked. She replied that it was not, offering general insights she’d gleaned from the social worker who dealt with the children when she handed them off to CPS. There had been multiple incidents in the last two-and-a-half years, the social worker told her, and the system was too understaffed to keep up with the at-risk families. The problems seemed to have grown significantly following a series of layoffs in a nearby food processing plant, causing increases in unemployment and stress on local food banks. Some of the workers found jobs in local big box stores, but they worked at minimum wage and could not afford childcare, leaving children at home alone and unsupervised. Jobs were available in a larger suburb 40 miles away, but

most lacked appropriate transportation, and the public transit system had inadequate routes. “The stress of underemployment, pressure of latchkey kids, and the stress on relationships has really hurt the folks in this area,” the social worker told Myla. “It’s complicated, but there are some things that could be done to help.”

When Myla shared these words with the Bible study members, one particularly verbal member blurted out, “Why don’t we do something? This is exactly what Pastor Purdy was talking about in his message last week! If we help these people, we are helping Jesus!” “Whoa, there, Bessie,” said another member. “It’s not that easy. We could get hurt, it could cost the church a lot of money. And we don’t even know what these people need.” After other members of the group offered their opinions, they agreed that Myla and one other member would meet with Pastor Purdy and the church council to see what Contented Covenant might do.

- What is the presenting issue in this case study? Its root cause(s)?
- Who are the key players?
- What are the challenges at play – from the central players to those on the periphery?
- What’s the role of the church? How can the church respond in a way that is conducive for transformation? Create a plan to move forward.

Coaches/Expert Practitioners

- CMJ Advocacy Leadership Team (representatives from regional conferences)
- Racial Righteousness Facilitators
- Women Ministries Coaches
- AVA (Advocates for Victims of Abuse) Regional Coordinators

Resources

- *Covenant Companion* issue on Mass Incarceration, July 2012
<http://covchurch.tv/companion-july-2012-feature/>
- **PROTECT** Material to address the Human Trafficking
- ECC story Webcast archive links:
 - “Take One: Compassion, Mercy, and Justice Resource Paper,”
<http://covchurch.tv/cmj-resource-paper-conversation/>
 - “Sankofa: The Journey Continues 2013,” <http://covchurch.tv/sankofa-journey-continues-2013/>
 - “Interview with Michelle Alexander,” <http://covchurch.tv/michelle-alexander/>

- Three book recommendations
 - *Balcony Women*, compiled by Women Ministries History Commission
 - *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander
 - *Social Justice Handbook: Small Steps for a Better World*, Mae Cannon
 - *Compassion, Justice and the Christian Life: Rethinking Ministry to the Poor*, Robert Lupton
 - *Christians at the Border*, Daniel Carroll
- A few workshops, videos,
 - Sankofa journey/J2M (regional) -- experiential
 - Invitation to Racial Righteousness – local church experience
 - “What Does the Lord Require?” curriculum
 - “Loving Mercy, Doing Justice: Responding Faithfully to God’s Call” video curriculum
 - “The House I Live In” video on the War on Drugs
 - “The Line” video on poverty
 - “A Place at the Table” video on hunger
 - “Gospel Without Borders” video on immigration
- Songs/hymns
 - We Will Love Justice, by Foster
 - Let Justice Roll Down (Hymnal #?)

Conclusion

Aligning our hearts with the heart of God must call us to holistic ministry that brings hope and transformation to those on the margins, resulting in a transformation of the church as well. As our eyes are opened to the hurting in our communities and beyond, we are compelled to meet the immediate needs to alleviate the hurt and address systems that cause the hurt. This will require the church to preach prophetically, leading disciples to respond to the brokenness as biblical people who will be seen *loving mercy and doing justice*.