

Paths to Justice (Structures for Justice) by Jack H. Bender
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Across the country 15,000+ graduates and associated committees are trying to figure out next steps. I've attempted to imagine what paths our justice work could take. What are the possible structures that we can create to help us in our work? These thoughts are mine alone, so you can actually shoot the messenger, but I think it's safe to say that a frequent word bouncing around in our committee has been *community*.

My elevator story—I'm attempting to support you by helping you consider how to express your concern, gifts and passion. We'll cover the path of entrepreneur, small group, the parish, faith-based community organizing, movements and emergence. What has surfaced from my preparation is that a key concept is *structure*: how to gather with others in order to give form to what God has called us to do.

Early on some concepts started bouncing around in my head and my resources often caught me wanting for clarity and perspective—church, Christian, community, justice, person, people, gifts, call, vocation... As I use some of these words, I'm thinking of the following.

Person – created in the image of God, a liberator of others, unique, gifted, *more* important than any group. Jean Vanier writes, “Community must never take precedence over individual people. [Community] is for *people* and their growth.” Parker J. Palmer writes, “If true community is to flourish then the individual must flourish as well... In our corporate seeking, the individual must never be overpowered, never coerced into going along, never put in the position of an outvoted and embittered minority.” Such reverence for each person will impede groups of any size from becoming hurtful.

People – accountable, committed, hopeful, gathered, chosen, called. *Distinctive* captures the essence of what I see. Connected with all of humanity, yet *distinctive* enough to be counter-culture, *prophetic*, else we are the crowd, society at large. If an oppressed people, able to say “My people are humiliated.” “My people are hungry.” “My people are dying.”

Church – Buechner says that the visible church is easy to find. Walk into any church on Sunday and look. The invisible church is made up of people doing God's work. No one knows who they are except God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “The church is the church only when it exists for others.” I've been to large churches that could be defined as “entertainment centers” for the consumption of music, sermons and coffee. While not an either/or question, the church must declare its bias, “Sanctuary or Street?”

Christian – a *really* nice person... Buechner points out that Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6) A Christian is anyone “on the way.” My favorite example of a Christian is a story about a Mennonite named Dirk Willems, because Christians do “deeds that need no interpretation.” Willems was fleeing arrest as a heretic, being pursued by a “thief catcher.” As the two ran across the ice, the pursuer broke through. Willems turned around and saved the man's life. Somehow, the thief catcher was forced to arrest Willems who was eventually convicted and burned to death over a “lingering fire.” Bonhoeffer is right. “Whenever Christ calls us, His call leads us to death.” I think he wanted us to take that statement both figuratively and literally.

Community – Whoa! In my mind, a highly misunderstood concept, often thought of in “romantic” terms. I'll just say two things here. First, it's a highly complex force field for which we long and fear. Second, the best definition I've run across comes from Parker J. Palmer. Community is the place where the most irritating person you know leaves and another as bad or worse takes his or her place.

The reason I address these terms is to suggest that we need to revisit these concepts, with our communities, in order to be clear. Clarity helps us avoid misunderstanding while promoting solidarity.

Paths to Justice (Structures to Justice)

The first structure appropriate for some of us would be that of entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs are rare, however, they do exist. They're usually below the media's radar, hence, our own, but they solve social problems on a large scale. One such entrepreneur is Fabio Rosa who has brought electricity and financial stability to people living in rural Brazil. A key partner has been Ennio Amaral an engineer who invented a single wire system, eliminating two of three wires used in conventional systems. Interviews with rural farmers, experimenting, navigating the system and two decades of tenacious work caused the creation of a grid which supported the electrical pumping of ground water used to irrigate crops and raised incomes four to six times their previous levels. Technical challenges halted work. The resistance to the social diffusion of this idea had to be overcome. Government regulations prohibited establishing the grid. Yet, in the end, thousands benefited with potable water, refrigeration, lighting, TV and incomes for a "reasonable life."

Another is Gloria de Souza, an elementary teacher in Bombay, who would shudder at hearing repetitive rote learning as she walked down the hallway of her school. She attended a workshop on experiential and environmental education. She left energized and approached colleagues with her ideas and enthusiasm. "Sounds great, but not for India," was their reply. Five years passed with her still failing to convince the school she was at to adopt her methods. Souza is still at it more than twenty years after making a commitment to change teaching methods in her country. Now, millions of children learn with her methods that have been adopted at the national level. Journalist David Bornstein lists six qualities of successful social entrepreneurs. They have a willingness to:

1. self-correct
2. share credit
3. cross discipline boundaries
4. break free of established structures
5. work quietly, and
6. possess a strong ethical impetus

As I prepared for this talk, I was struck by the absence of evidence for going it alone. Even these entrepreneurs found supportive structures. I'm concerned for anyone in a situation that dictates solitary justice work. We all deserve the support of a community. I wonder how many of us are still going it alone since graduation. Have we found or formed a community that helps us do our best work?

Another path to justice is being a member of an intentional community of growing Christians who have missions, but different than our own. If it's true community, this works. I'm thinking of a community of four or five to maybe a dozen members that share your passion for Christ and a strong interest in personal growth.

Another path is being in community with others who share the same ministry, four or five to a dozen that have committed their lives to a specific justice area. It is becoming easier to form these communities with increasing numbers of JustFaith graduates, a growing concern for social problems and churches that encourage both the formation of small communities and/or justice work.

For many reasons, my bias is in favor of these small groups, so we will explore the advantages. I'd like to highlight three other structures and then return to small, Christian, social justice communities.

The justice-oriented parish is another viable path. The local church leader is the key in establishing the church's bias toward justice work. The priest or pastor is someone who believes that "to fulfill the Great Commission, we must take the church into the streets in order to truly be church." (Jacobsen) The question "Sanctuary or street?" has been addressed. Do you have the passion and gifts for helping your parish increase its justice impact? What would it take for you to discuss this with your priest or pastor and leadership groups? How would you help other members see justice as the fundamental witness of Jesus?

Given a justice orientation, a church can participate in congregation-based community organizing, yet another path. While any of the previous models could require us to confront power, congregation-based community organizing most certainly does. This path has its roots in the work of Chicago organizer Saul Alinsky. Before Alinsky the assumption was “there’s something wrong with people so provide them with services.” His assumption was different—outsiders are abusing the community; join together and confront power. If enough groups in the community can be mobilized, they will influence key decisions that affect the community.

Alinsky was irreverent. Embarrassing the powerful or making them feel uncomfortable were key strategies. If after exhaustively reasoning, requesting and pleading for garbage removal, and to no avail, dumping garbage on a commissioner’s lawn would not be out of the question. Neither would buying tickets to the symphony for a large group of African Americans who would have had generous servings of pork and beans. Toot if you love Jesus.

Frederick Douglass is often quoted as saying, “Power yields nothing without a struggle. It never has and it never will.” History supports his claim. The necessity to act powerfully will challenge our personal ethics. Pastor and activist Dennis A. Jacobsen, in *Doing Justice*, points out that our personal ethics are very different than the ethics required for community organizing. We will feel uncomfortable doing work in this structure, but it seems to me that our discomfort is a small burden to carry for the sake of others.

There are four national networks active in the U.S. and the Chicago-based Gamaliel Foundation has by far the most Michigan affiliates.

MOSES – Detroit

Ezekiel – Saginaw

ISAAC – Kalamazoo

JONAH – Battle Creek

(Groups have begun to organize in Grand Rapids, The Micah Center and the Gamaliel Foundation.)

All four networks establish local affiliates in the same way. A sponsoring committee has three tasks:

1. Raise (typically) \$150,000
2. Recruit twenty or more dues-paying congregations (often of a dozen or more denominations)
3. Train a significant number of leaders through a 7-10 day workshop (Jacobsen)

As you can see, the parish is the building block of the organization. Developing three or four goals for the initiative comes from conducting thousands of one-on-one interviews to uncover the “motivational depths,” the self-interest of community members. What do people really care about that needs to be redeemed?

Systemic change on a number of issues is possible at this level. If we always work below the systemic level, power will be pleased that we’ve opted for filling in the gaps over changing the system. We can exhaust ourselves helping others while not making lasting change.

Churches in Michigan are moving forward using this model. Is your church at a place where it can approach other churches and begin exploring possibilities? Has it received an invitation from another church? Is there something in this model that ignites your passion?

Movements are yet another path toward justice. Movements ask, “How can power be rearranged?” They begin when a dead end has been reached using normal institutional channels. During the gestational period of a movement the experience is one of gridlock and despair.

The power of a movement comes from rejecting the logic of the city, state or nation by developing a different set of rules with which to operate.

In broadest terms, movements have four stages:

1. isolated individuals stop living divided lives.
2. these people find each other, forming communities of support

3. these groups find ways to translate their issues of concern into “public issues”
4. the movement develops its own set of rewards forcing the system to change from pressures of massive non-compliance (Parker J. Palmer)

In the first step, members of the newborn movement choose authenticity. In the civil rights movement members could no longer endure seeing themselves as a people of dignity while being treated otherwise. How could there be separate facilities and rules if everyone was supposed to be equal? The gap between inner reality and outer experience was too painful to ignore. Clubs, hoses, dogs, jail and even death were of less consequence than living a divided life. We marvel at the courage of Rosa Parks and imagine it coming from a simple need of tired feet. But Parks had dozens of opportunities to talk with others about the black experience. She had a new consciousness. In her words, “The only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

In the second step, communal support helps members retain their sanity and develop a support system. They learn that their private concerns are concerns held by many others.

In “going public,” the third step, small groups help their members turn their private concerns into public issues. Through discussions among themselves they test, refine and unconsciously rehearse taking their discussions into public spaces. Into churches, restaurants, barbershops, beauty parlors, hardwares and grocery stores go the issues that could not be voiced publicly earlier.

Then the movement causes alternative rewards to surface. Leadership positions and recognition become available both inside and outside the target institution. Finally, the organization co-opts the values of the movement due to the pressure of non-compliance.

Do you sense that movements are waiting to happen or underway? If so, what issues will they most likely address? What are your passions and gifts? Are they a match for any of these?

Circling back, let's consider the small group as a viable form of communal support. What seems doable now, if you haven't found or created it yet, is a small, intentional community whose ministry is justice. In all the previous models mentioned, haven't they been composed of small communities and committees acting together? I think *scale* and *structure* are important considerations as we think about doing effective justice work.

A new book, *Community: the structure of belonging*, by business consultant Peter Block is very useful in outlining how to organize and do justice work. In it he declares, “The small group is the unit of transformation.” Margaret Mead says the same thing (you've heard this one), “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” The small group, the intentional community, is the place where we receive the experience of belonging, the experience of being cared for and the opportunity to care for others. Only in a small group can we process pain and explore our doubts and our confusion. It is here that we can go deeply.

Scale is important. Author and environmentalist Bill McKibben writes:

The story of the twentieth century
was finding out just how big
and powerful we were. And it
turns out that we're big and
powerful as all get out. The story
of the twenty-first century is going
to be finding out if we can figure
out ways to get smaller or not.
To see if we can summon the will,
and then the way, to make
ourselves somewhat smaller, and
try to fit back into this planet.

Christina Baldwin declares, “Size is an important factor in community...When we are looking for the point of empowerment that allows us to activate our citizenship, we need to start with a unity that is tangible and immediate: this household, this school, this church... When we address a problem, we need to engage it in a size we can imagine handling: this creek, these children, this garbage burner...We react to the personal. Show us one child, one animal, one tree, one situation, and we are much more likely to get involved...”

Small Christian community advocate Father Art Baranowski writes, “Parishes need to restructure because parishes, as we now have them, are ineffective...Our present world is different enough from even the recent past to demand a different structure for bringing [people] together in the parish.” Our structures have grown too large. A Christian life-style, discernment, experiencing love, deepening our faith and exchanging care for one another is nearly impossible to do at the parish level, but those experiences are the foundation of a small group. “The way we come together as church is primary.”

Individualism is not an effective response to our problem of scale, for we are to be a gathered people. Quaker and writer Sandra Cronk states that “The inbreaking of God’s order in our lives is the ever-increasing concern for justice.” And this increasing concern demands that we live this new order, but not in solitude. “One cannot live God’s new order alone. It is necessary to have a community to embody a new pattern of living. Without a gathering of people to live God’s new order...it can never bear fruit.”

This seems to be the “match made in heaven.” Thoughtful people are suggesting that a small group has many advantages. We can both grow more effectively spiritually and do justice work in small communities.

I have this deep yearning for significant, large-scale change. It’s what’s needed. But the path to it is community. To go big, we have to go small. We can sustain our hope by knowing that small groups make possible, parishes, community organizing, movements and a phenomenon called emergence.

All change is linguistic. All change is linguistic because words are powerful. God *said*, “Let there be light, and there was light.” The Hebrew word *dabar* means both “word” *and* “deed.” Another interpretation has “word” meaning “structure.” As we talk we restructure the world.

I interviewed Quakers outside of Philadelphia a few years ago and their openness when meeting another person was inspirational. They were always open to the possibility that a conversation would cause a significant change in them. In their own words, they expected to be “shaken,” “whacked” and “blown away” by the words of another.

Block suggests that there are six essential *conversations* we need to embrace over and over as we work with others:

Invitation – name the possibility, describe what’s required and state that refusal carries no penalty

Possibility – What declaration can I make that has the power to transform the community?

Ownership – How participative do I plan to be? How much risk am I willing to take?

Dissent – What doubts do I have? What refusal am I postponing?

Commitment – What promises am I willing to make? What price am I willing to pay?

Gifts – What is the gift I’m not offering? What is something about me that no one knows?

In *Turning to One Another* organizational consultant Margaret J. Wheatley writes about the power of conversation.

A Canadian woman...was returning to Vietnam to pick up her second child, adopted from the same orphanage as her first child. She...had vowed this time to take medical supplies. “They needed Tylenol, not T-shirts or trinkets.” She was expressing this to a friend one day, and the friend suggested that...she might take...an incubator. She was surprised by the suggestion...but she started making phone calls, looking for an incubator. Many calls and weeks later, she had been offered enough pediatric medical supplies to fill four forty-foot

shipping containers! And twelve incubators. From a casual conversation...[came]...a medical relief program that made a significant difference in the lives of Vietnamese children. And it all began when “some friend and I started talking.”

This story prompts me to ask, “What should I express and to whom?” “What are the discussions that I’ve been harboring in my heart, yearning to let loose?” What are yours?

It’s been a privilege to do a little poverty work in Detroit. Potholes, garbage, abandoned buildings and church parking lots with fencing and guardhouses only begin to tell of the desolation. I was meeting in a church basement with a small group while an attendee’s tires were being stolen.

I’ve come to see that desolation is the byproduct of isolation. At the end of the three-day conference in Detroit that I facilitated, it was clear what small group discussions had accomplished. The attendees had known all along what to do and how to do it. They committed to developing safe ways to schools, a community center, job counseling and repurposing of abandoned land and buildings. It took the prayers and dedication of the sponsoring group and *conversation* in small groups to release what was waiting to happen.

The small group is the unit of transformation. All change is linguistic. (Block)

Church of the Savior member Elizabeth O’Connor writes that preparation for or sustaining a justice mission has five elements. In *Journey Inward, Journey Outward* she describes these elements:

1. the need to develop an interior life if we are to be a people who are present, aware
2. the need to discover and exercise our gifts if we are to be a celebrating people, open to life
3. the need to develop disciplines to develop our potential
4. the need to know ourselves if we are to be a people growing
5. the need to be shepherds in order to cross the line separating receiving and giving

These growth tasks are best done in community. On our path we must discover our gifts and our shadow in order to become effective and whole. O’Connor’s outline strongly suggests that in order to do justice work, one must work on one’s self.

Jean Vanier is deeply experienced with community, gifts and brokenness. Both Vanier and O’Connor stress the discovery and use of gifts. Vanier writes:

Using our gifts is building community. If we are not faithful to our gifts, we are harming the community and each of its members as well. So it is important that all members know what their gifts are, use them and take responsibility for developing them...

In the search for my own gifts, I came to a place that seemed like the end of the road. It felt like I had exhausted all avenues. What was I to do next? Befriending my shadow turned out to be a natural step. I look backward on that experience and see that I had collected a stack of poker chips while studying my gifts, enough chips to gamble at looking at my shadow.

I interviewed effervescent Sister Sue Tracy about her formation experience. What is the formation process like? How do the religious prepare to do God’s work? What advice do you have for me? “Embrace your shadow!” was her reply. Carl Jung said that he’d “rather be whole than good.” Psychologist Michael Lindfield asks himself, “What happens if I do not welcome some aspects of myself and banish them to a life outside...? How can I find wholeness if some of the pieces are missing?” From experience comes the belief that my compassion and understanding are rooted in my shadow.

We are an oppressed people and countless others are more oppressed. Ours is a deceptive, comfortable, opulent oppression, but nonetheless oppression. In his talk at Marywood last year, Jack Jezreel named three conditions that foster oppression:

1. the economics of inequality (people being used to make others rich)
2. the politics of oppression (power that impedes access to a reasonable life)
3. an established religion (an interpretation that blesses evil and shuts down dissent)

Jack pointed out that the dismantling of oppression starts at the third condition—religion. Jesus kept pointing to the reign of God and consistently displayed counter-culture values. So, I return to the word “distinctive” again. Are we, as a people, different enough from society to be similarly prophetic?

We have not been above relating our comfort with God’s favor. How, then, do we look at those who are less fortunate than ourselves? Society’s values have infiltrated our churches and we have allowed this assimilation to take place. Even worse, I believe we are fighting two other “religions”—American-style democracy and American-style capitalism. The growth of these highly distorted forms has been so great as to almost constitute religious status. “How dare you speak against democracy!” “Love it or leave it!” “Our system of goods and services is the most productive and prosperous system on earth!”—right, three credit cards in every pot. We are fooled into believing that we have freedom and individuality, but we really don’t in the ways that truly matter. We live in circumstances that significantly diminish our ability to help our neighbor. But the sign of the times is one of limits, a chance to set things right, potentially a time of Jubilee.

A clear task for a prophetic people, a liberating people, is to help others wake to reality. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* the author writes that we have two tasks, one of which he poses as a question. “How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?” How can we learn to free ourselves and others? And Paulo Freire continues, “This is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.” Gandhi and Mandela both knew that their oppressors were caught in a straightjacket of their own, for the most important job power has is to maintain or increase its power. Only the pressure of a loving people can change the relationship between oppressors and the oppressed and the balance of power.

If a small, intentional community is so right for us, how can large-scale systemic change take place? In the near future we will be able to network with numerous small groups to participate in community organizing and movements. We can also thoughtfully nurture the conditions for a process that the natural world uses all the time—emergence.

I found the following in a conference brochure on systemic change. “Despite current ads and slogans, the world doesn’t change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what’s possible. When separate, local efforts connect with each other as networks, then strengthen as communities of practice, a new system emerges at a greater level of scale. This system always possesses greater power and influence than is possible through planned, incremental change.” (Berkana Exchange) Peter Block’s view relates. “A large-scale change takes place when many small groups shift in harmony toward the larger change.” Small communities focused on justice can have a huge impact.

Looking almost as an outsider at faith groups I’ve worked with, I have seen unparalleled accountability, commitment and hope that distinguish faith groups from others. As the people of God we can render speechless those we encounter with “deeds that need no explanation.” We can create profound silence that only truth can birth by proclaiming the Good News. False religions crack and crumble when confronted with truth. Oppressors can be disarmed.

The time is 1964 and the Democratic National Convention has convened. Fannie Lou Hamer has begun to challenge the credentials of delegates from her state of Mississippi. Where are the black delegates? 600,000 people don’t matter? Soon to be declared the party’s presidential nominee, Lyndon Johnson sends a delegation, headed by his running mate, to buy her off. Hubert Humphrey expects a political negotiation to ensue and a quick victory. Humphrey asks, “What do you want?” Hamer responds, “The Kingdom of Jesus. That’s what I want.” Humphrey was rendered speechless.

I’m sure all of us can say the same thing, “The Kingdom of Jesus. That’s what I want.”

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