

TASK FORCE ON THEOLOGY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY

Membership

Ms. Sarah Lawton, <i>Chair</i>	California, VIII	2021
The Rt. Rev. Prince Singh, <i>Vice-Chair</i>	Rochester, II	2021
The Rt. Rev. Andrew Dietsche	New York, II	2021
Ms. Ruth Frey	New York, II	2021
The Rt. Rev. Anne Hodges-Copple	North Carolina, IV	2021
Prof. Brant Lee	Ohio, V	2021
The Rev. Deacon Guy Leemhuis	Los Angeles, VIII	2021
Ms. Lallie Lloyd	Massachusetts, I	2021
Dr. Dora Mbuwayesango	North Carolina, IV	2021
The Rev. Jose Rodriguez-Sanjuro	Central Florida, IV	2021
Dr. Reuben Varghese	Washington, III	2021
The Rev. Susanne Watson Epting	Iowa, VI	2021
The Most Rev. Michael Curry, <i>Ex Officio</i>	North Carolina, IV	
The Rev. Gay Clark Jennings, <i>Ex Officio</i>	Ohio, V	

Mandate

2018-A056 Create Task Force on the Theology of Social Justice Advocacy as Christian Justice

Resolved, the House of Deputies concurring, That the 79th General Convention direct the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies of The Episcopal Church to appoint a Task Force on the Theology of Social Justice Advocacy as Christian Ministry, consisting of three (3) bishops, three (3) presbyters or deacons, to include both orders, and six (6) lay persons, who represent the diversity of the Church, to be tasked in this triennium to consider scripture, approved liturgical resources, other theological texts and previous actions of General Convention to summarize the ways in which The Episcopal Church understands the work for social justice as essential mission and ministry of the Christian Church; and be it further

Resolved, That the Task Force study how The Episcopal Church currently fosters theological understanding and leadership for social justice, and recommend ways to foster theological and practical conversation across the Church on this topic; and be it further

Resolved, That the Task Force be directed to report its findings and recommendations to the 80th General Convention; and be it further.

Summary of Work

The Task Force met monthly via Zoom between January 2019 and January 2021. After reviewing its mandate and setting norms, the group agreed that each member would share what informs their theology of social justice advocacy. Told from our different and mutually enriching perspectives, these precious stories revealed equally different and enriching understandings of the theology of social justice. Through this journey of sacred stories, which included references to Scripture, theological concepts, and ongoing reflection on world events, it became clear to the Task Force that The Episcopal Church has much work to do in re-examining our theology of social justice advocacy.

The work is urgent.

The suffering produced by injustice is with us now and does not wait for us to perfect our concepts and amend our tenets. As we were in the process of sharing our stories, our deliberations were interrupted by a global pandemic that disrupted our lives in ways not seen for a century. The disease most heavily affected those already harmed by systemic inequality, the most vulnerable in our society. We were interrupted again when the world experienced the visceral impact of watching, on small screens and large, the death of George Floyd. People felt the call to action and the Church was called with them.

These tragedies, lives lost to disease and lives lost to violence, were produced or exacerbated by government policy and by public behavior. The state, by what it does and what it leaves undone, demonstrates the power of its influence on people's lives. The collective action of people, as they comply or refuse to comply with exhortations of public actors, demonstrate the power of citizens in a free society. There is no neutral position in this world. To be silent is to be complicit. The Church cannot avoid a choice. And the Church cannot avoid examining every aspect of its life, whether theology, liturgy or governance, in how it either perpetuates or eases the burdens of inequality. The work is urgent.

We see the work, in fact the call to social justice, as a continuum, manifesting in direct service, financial support, advocacy for systemic change and reforming our own structures. Each form is important as, collectively and organically, we seek to be the Body of Christ, and all of God's people are important in building, mending, and strengthening relationships and changing systems.

Context:

Our individual contexts (including, but not limited to, geography, socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, ability/disability, gender, sexual orientation) create the lenses of perception through which we see the world as Christian individuals and as Christian community.

Our shared Episcopal identity affects every aspect of the Task Force's work, and one of our primary concerns is to place our work in the context of who we are as The Episcopal Church: we are a primarily white church that has benefitted from systems created by white men of wealth and privilege. While our church includes multi-racial and multi-ethnic siblings from countries outside the United States, ninety percent of U.S. Episcopalians are white.⁽¹⁾ In addition, the Episcopal Church actively retains 18th century institutional structures of governance, hierarchical authority, and rules-based procedure built by and for a dominant culture of patriarchy, classism, white supremacy, imperialism, and colonization.

Some implications of this were eloquently described by The Rev. Gay Clark Jennings, President of the House of Deputies:⁽²⁾

Too often, we are too proud that eleven presidents have been Episcopalians, that presidents and members of Congress and Supreme Court justices worship at our churches, and that we bury them with pomp and circumstance when they die. We are proud that, in Episcopal pews across the country, you can find civic leaders and business tycoons and media superstars. We still like our access to power and wealth.

Now, there are many places in the church where the great wealth to which we have access is being used for great good. And we are justifiably proud that our history also includes prophets like Absalom Jones, Pauli Murray, Thurgood Marshall, and the martyr Jonathan Daniels. But in recent years, our identity as the church of the establishment has sometimes hindered our collective willingness to speak the truth about racist, xenophobic, anti-democratic policies and actions and the brutal policing and enforcement actions and practices that undergird them. Like the Anglicans who worshipped at Cape Coast Castle, we have helped normalize oppression and racism and the people who enforce it, because we have been too comfortable with our relationship to temporal power.

Other themes pertaining to white supremacy and the dominant culture emerged in our reflections, including:

- Western Christianity has evolved in a symbiotic relationship with the engines of capitalism, where a concern to manage and protect financial assets are often valued over care and protection of people and creation.
- Our socially constructed narrative is one of individualism.
- Various cultures see and hear the Gospel differently. For example, it is embraced by Dalits of India (and other people who are oppressed) as a liberating text. Is that so among people of greater privilege?
- We need to reckon with the Episcopal Church's past for having colluded, consistently and often subliminally, with the Empire. Such a reckoning calls us to humbly name and lament the ways we have sustained systems of privilege and superiority, misusing Scripture for tacit approval.
- We need to acknowledge and lament the Church's role, sometimes active and sometimes as bystander, in the construction and perpetuation of economic and social systems that coerced Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latin Americans, and other groups into less than human and subaltern status.
- We have difficulty recognizing and critiquing systems of domination both inside the Church and in the world. We refer people to the secular government to handle many difficult issues and often—consciously or unconsciously—remain unaware of the impact our lack of attention has on the most vulnerable. This includes systems that are deeply embedded, providing uneven and unequal access to material building blocks for a dignified life, such as access to appropriate health care, a good education, and family-wage jobs, which cannot be resolved by charitable donations, however important those can be in meeting immediate needs. Although many of our congregations are involved in much-needed programs of service and charity, we do not as often look “upstream” to understand what is the source of the ongoing problems that our programs are trying to address.

Given these contexts, we cannot avoid the observation that the lens through which many look at social justice is distorted.

While this report is not specifically a study about race or racial disparity, one constant theme in our work has been the centrality of race and racial disparity in addressing social justice advocacy.

How do we acquire the lens of Christ as we look at social justice?

Acknowledgement of History:

We can start by looking to prophets and laborers in our own tradition who have come before us. From Absalom Jones, first African American priest of our church, who preached mighty sermons and who published and petitioned against slavery, to Edward Willis Rodman, theologian, teacher, and pastor who helped to found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and who led the Episcopal Urban Caucus to push the Episcopal Church to focus on the intertwining of poverty and racism. We are rightly proud of the historic contributions of laypersons in public service, notably Francis Perkins, Secretary of Labor and architect of the New Deal; and Thurgood Marshall, civil rights attorney and first African American Supreme Court justice, both faithful Episcopalians who cited their faith as the basis for their work for justice in the political sphere.

We acknowledge the labor of pastors, preachers, and deacons, who have shepherded communities through times of terrible trauma: first Native American priest Enmegahbowh and deacon David Pendleton Oakerhater during the violent U.S. westward expansion into Indigenous lands in the 19th Century. We remember lay missionary and railroad worker Ah Foo, who helped start the first Asian Episcopal Church, in Carson City, Nevada. We look to the first Asian American churches in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Honolulu, who supported their communities through the traumas of the Chinese Exclusion Act and Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 leading to the internment of Japanese Americans. In an Episcopal Cafe series on the Asian American Episcopal Church, Bishop Allen Shin, Suffragan of New York, reflected that

Many of the Asians stayed in the church, despite the challenges and racial discrimination that they experienced. In fact, similarly to African Americans, Christianity was actually their outlet. Church was their community center. Church was the center of their communal life. Church had an important role in bridging and bonding the community together.⁽³⁾

The Blue Book report of the Committee on the State of the Church in 2018 describes a perception of the Church's officially sponsored "outreach to people of color in traditional missionary terms of ministry to those people: bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to these communities and building agencies and institutions to provide for health care, education and social welfare"⁽⁴⁾

We look to the local initiatives of congregations and dioceses that have been anchors for their communities in the midst of upheaval and change—to name just a few examples: Church of the Epiphany / La Iglesia de la Epifania in Los Angeles, which became a center for the Chicano Movement in the 1960s;⁽⁵⁾

The historic work of church members and organizations in advocating for racial justice, from the abolition movement through Reconstruction and then Jim Crow to the Civil Rights Movement and up to today remains an important touchstone for our work today, from the early work of the Conference of Church Workers Among the Colored People (CCWACP), founded in 1883, and its successor organization the Union of Black Clergy and Laity (1968), later called the Union of Black Episcopalians (UBE). Their work was supported by groups such as the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU), founded in 1959. Some of this work was focused on participation in the wider movement events of the day, such as the various marches in Selma in 1965 and voting rights campaigns, and some of the work was focused internally on our own Church's segregated institutions, from congregations to hospitals to seminaries in both South and North.

At the time, the Church's engagement with the Civil Rights Movement was often portrayed as controversial, divisive, and partisan, just as we hear today about church participation in Black Lives Matter protests. Yet the considerations of the participants at the time were explicitly linked to their Christian faith, especially in the mystery of the incarnation of Jesus, and our baptism, communion, and resurrection in Christ. Or as church seminarian and Civil Rights martyr Jonathan Daniels wrote: "I began to know in my bones and sinews that I had been truly baptized into the Lord's death and resurrection...with them, the black men and white men, with all life, in him whose Name is above all names that the races and nations shout...we are indelibly and unspeakably one."⁽⁶⁾

The Episcopal Church has also had times of engagement and investment in economic justice, notably in funding invested in the General Convention Special Program and its Joint Urban Program from 1967 to 1983, and then in the Jubilee Ministry program begun in 1982 to start Jubilee Centers at diocesan and local levels and provide resources for training, networking, and action in a diverse set of urban and rural communities. The Jubilee resolution was undergirded by a theological and Biblical reflection offered by the Standing Commission on the Church in Metropolitan Areas in their 1982 Blue Book report:

We believe that in the Church's doctrine of the Incarnation we come face to face with our mission. Christ dwells among the least of our brothers and sisters; Certainly we are called to minister to the immediate suffering which afflicts the victims of society whom we see all around us; distribution of food, medical care, shelter, and other immediate and primary needs. But we also know that such ministries are not enough, because they do not address the injustice which causes the pain in the first place. The People of God share a mission to change whatever causes the oppression.

From the 1970s into the 21st century, the advocacy work of a shifting group of organizations, including the National Industrial Mission, Episcopal Urban Caucus, the Union of Black Episcopalians,

the Episcopal Network for Economic Justice, the Episcopal Peace Fellowship, Episcopal Women's Caucus, Episcopal Asiamerica Ministries, Integrity / Episcopal Rainbow, Claiming the Blessing, and TransEpiscopal, has been a key force in pushing the Church to engage in public advocacy. The newsletter "Issues" was begun in the living room of Episcopal theologian William Stringfellow to call the Church to its witness in the name of Christ; *Issues* is now the newsletter of The Consultation, a collaboration of social justice organizations in the Church.

In the push for women's ordination led by the a number of organizations and leaders including the Episcopal Women's Caucus and the Philadelphia Eleven, and then, the push for sacramental access for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people—we acknowledge here the vision of our late brother Louie Crew, founder of Integrity—the Episcopal Church also began to take positions on public policy related to lesbian and gay, and eventually, starting in 2009, transgender civil rights: relying on those resolutions, our church leaders have been in forefront among faith communities in advocating for LGBTQ civil rights; notably, our church's presiding officers were the lead signers on a 2019 amicus brief to the Supreme Court related to workplace discrimination against LGBT workers, *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia*; ⁽⁷⁾ as well, state representative Byron Rushing, also a senior deputy to General Convention, was a lead sponsor in 2011 of the Transgender Equal Rights Bill in Massachusetts.

In recent years, environmental and climate justice has been another major theme of church policy work. The work of Gwich'in Episcopalian communities in Alaska and of the Standing Rock Episcopal Mission in South Dakota have called the Church to respond to the effects of fossil fuels on humanity and the Earth. As well, the Church has focused on supporting immigrants and refugees, and has carried that work into advocacy on refugee and immigration policy. While the impetus for the work has come from immigrant congregations and solidarity work in affected communities, it has been taken up by the Episcopal Church's Office of Government Relations and the Episcopal Public Policy Network, with significant staff time allocated for this work.

With the emergence of a new uprising for racial justice in the wake of police killings of Black folk from Ferguson to Staten Island to Louisville to Minneapolis (let us say their names: Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd) and the terrible murders at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, the Episcopal Church has begun to stir again. Led by Presiding Bishop Curry and with Becoming Beloved Community, the Sacred Ground curriculum, the Absalom Jones Center, and local resources, local congregations are engaging in new ways, though unevenly, with a new reckoning of our church's involvement in and complicity with racism. Some key recent General Convention resolutions include our repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery in 2009 [2009-D035]; the call to examine our historic ties and financial benefit derived from slavery in 2006 [2006-A123], later

extended in 2009; and the resolution calling for removal of the Confederate battle flag from churches, which was offered by the entire deputation of the Diocese of Mississippi in 2015 in response to the killings in Charleston [2015-D044].

A few major themes can be seen in this (brief and incomplete) survey: one is that the push for Episcopal Church involvement in social justice advocacy has always emerged from the communities most affected by injustice, and that those communities have understood our Christian faith and the love of Christ Jesus to be at the center of this advocacy. Indeed, while the Church-at-large has responded, the burden has often been on those communities to bring those issues to the attention of those who make policy, establish priorities, and allocate resources. We have wonderful examples and prophets, many of them now enshrined in Lesser Feasts and Fasts and its successor compilations. Yet our efforts have not always been sustained; we have started projects and then pulled back on funding and staffing them. Our triennial structure sometimes contributes to abrupt endings to work that is lifelong for both individuals and organizations.

It should be said that the Office of Government Relations and Episcopal Public Policy Network do admirable work in connecting General Convention resolutions to advocacy work for public policy in Washington, DC, and the Executive Council's Committee on Corporate Social Responsibility takes responsibility for making sure our Church's investment portfolio aligns with our stated values; but we are asking the Church not only to respond to the issues brought from under-represented groups, but to make those issues central to how we make decisions, including how we invest in formation and prayer for discipleship at the local level.

These historical themes were borne out in our second year of work, as we engaged our own contexts and as the world experienced major crises in 2020.

Emerging Themes:

Discord. Division. Brokenness. Need for reform. Resistance to reform. Frustration. Helplessness. Revelation. Possibility. Hope?

The themes that emerged from our stories and reflections, and their implicit theologies, were key in guiding the second year of the group's work. These themes were identified before the COVID-19 pandemic was upon us and became even more evident after George Floyd was killed in May 2020. That they emerged, not only in the initial work of knitting us together relationally, but even more clearly through the crises around us, has compelled us to share them as a framework for our recommendations.

While the Task Force felt the familiar inclination to ensure terms were commonly understood and defined, we found that some themes emerged, again and again in our stories and reflections on the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism, and what those pandemics reveal about our failed systems and structures.

Some themes fit more or less neatly into one of the categories of “social,” or “justice,” or “advocacy,” but eventually they all intersected. These themes provided a lens through which we re-examined the concepts of “social justice,” and “advocacy.” And the theme of “distortion” was consistent and undeniable.

Social Justice

The term “social” can refer to how society is organized, to companionship, or to an event at which people gather. It is about interaction with others and therefore always about relationships.

In the Christian vision, the term “justice” does not only pertain to the law, but has to do with what is morally right: equity, fairness, dignity, and right relationship.

Since the Episcopal Church has devoted time and resources to deepening and living into building out our understanding of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vision of “Becoming Beloved Community,” his view of justice is particularly relevant. Dr. King wrote to white church leaders in 1963 in his Letter from the Birmingham City Jail that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” He taught that justice could not be parceled out to individuals or groups; it is the birthright of every human being.

If ‘objectivity’ is merely ‘collective subjectivity’⁽⁸⁾ then there is no such thing as ‘objective’ justice, only rules configured by, benefitting, and enforced by members of the dominant culture. Looking through the lens of Christ, the church is therefore called to resist the dominant culture and center ‘justice’ not definitionally on rules and enforcement, but experientially. The difference is between, on the one hand, experiencing fairness, protection, and restitution or, on the other, experiencing unfairness, bias, devastation, and—too often—death.

The call to justice, advocacy for justice, and persistent action for justice may be the most urgent call for the church, precisely because it existentially centers the voice, experience, and perspective of the vulnerable. Who among us can declare justice achieved except the oppressed and marginalized: the leper, the orphan, the widow; the Dalit, the BIPOC, the transgender person?

The church’s mission is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ [BCP, Catechism, p. 855]. Therefore, in the Christian vision, social justice is the lived reality of right

relationship among and between each and all of us: something we long for in our hearts and strive for in our world because we see God in Christ in every person. This is explicit in our Baptismal Covenant: “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” [BCP, Holy Baptism, p. 305].

This is the belief and covenant we assert, yet we tolerate and live with a profound distortion of this vision. A vivid example comes from one of our Task Force members, who wrote:

On this Pentecost, I saw this . . . at the end of a reflection: “If you would like to DO something to help dismantle systemic and institutional racism . . .” The reflection to that point was phenomenal for me as a brown person sitting in Episcopal pews over the years -- to finally hear words that recognize the oppression of people of color, suggesting that on the birthday of the church, transformation is what is being preached, called for. The plight of the oppressed was what was being centered. It gave me such hope.

And then, to see it [presented] as a choice (“If you would like to do something...”) for Christians who recite our baptismal covenant; [to hear it preached] that our profession of faith has optional components, that once again reflects a privilege to choose, which affords white Christians the option that Christians of color do not have. Striving for justice and peace is a matter of breathing for Black and Brown siblings, as past and present U.S. history has shown.⁽⁹⁾

Advocacy

Advocacy has been described as “a social change process affecting attitudes, social relationships and power relations, which strengthens civil society and opens up democratic spaces.”⁽¹⁰⁾ It consists of coordination, strategic thinking, information, communication, outreach and mobilization. It can be as simple as speaking up for another.

There can be a political aspect to advocacy, but there isn’t always. In fact, from the Latin “advocare” means ‘to call out for support.’ Like social justice, advocacy is a continuum: working to change public policy for the public good⁽¹¹⁾, advocacy can change public opinion and, likewise, affecting public opinion may lead to policy change.

Besides being extremely broadly defined, advocacy is surrounded by several persistent myths and misconceptions. Some the most common misconceptions include:

- Advocacy is only for professional lobbyists: In truth, advocacy is a public activity; while lobbying requires “behind-the-scenes” activities.

- Advocacy is walking down the street with a bullhorn or rioting in a demonstration or protest rally: In truth, rallies are activism, which can be useful as part of a larger strategy, but not always effective as advocacy in terms of sustained effort to change policy. Riots are violence.
- Advocacy is the same as fundraising or donating to charity: In truth, advocacy is about initiating social change, which cannot happen only by raising money. Social change is often achieved with little or almost no funds. At the same time, redirecting public and private resources can be an effective component of advocacy.
- Advocacy consumes a lot of time: In truth, advocacy doesn't have to be complicated or time-consuming – a properly planned and organized campaign requires small actions from many people rather than big ones from a few.
- Advocacy is all about “politics” (in a negative connotation): In truth, while advocacy can be political (i.e., lobbying for a specific piece of legislation), it is more often social and intellectual: focused on elevating, amplifying, and highlighting the voices and faces of affected people as well as speaking out on behalf of those without a voice or whose voice is suppressed or ignored.

(Thanks and credit to Anush Begloian for the framework and concepts in this section)⁽¹²⁾

Political

In turn, the word “political” is often confused with “partisan.” “Political” comes from the Greek (“*polis*,” meaning “affairs of the cities”), and does not equate with partisan. Politics means the set of activities for governing an area. Our church engages in politics when we bring our ethics and moral views into public conversations and deliberations about how our cities, towns, nations, and institutions are governed. We engage in politics when we ask: Who benefits from things as they are? Who is left out? How are the marginalized and most vulnerable affected by the action we are considering or the inaction we are tolerating that perpetuates things as they are?

Social Justice advocacy is core to the church's mission

The Task Force asserts that social justice advocacy is distinct from partisanship (though it may include supporting candidates or causes endorsed by a political party). Social justice advocacy is rooted in our moral tradition and our experience of Christ's death with us to sin and our hope of a risen life with him. Social justice advocacy is giving a public witness—through word and deed—to our biblical imperative to demonstrate our love for our neighbors.

Therefore, social justice advocacy is a central, not a peripheral or optional, manifestation of Christian discipleship.

Survey:

In the Fall of 2020, the Task Force sent a survey to bishops, deputies and other leaders of the church to gather stories and perspectives to inform our work. The survey was made available in English, Spanish, and French and was distributed with the help of the Episcopal communications office and the President of the House of Deputies.

Demographics

The survey received responses from 113 people. Reflecting the current racial makeup of the Church, a majority of respondents identified as White (82%) with minorities identifying as Black/African American (5%), Asian/Pacific Islander (2%), Hispanic/Latino (1%), Native American (1%). Ten percent of respondents chose not, or preferred not, to identify with the categories given. Women made up 66% of respondents, men 29%, while 9% chose not, or preferred not, to identify with the categories given. In terms of age groups, 16% of respondents were under the age of 50, with the majority of respondents 50 or older (50's 18%; 60's 23%, 70's 32%, 80's 10%; 90's 1%). In terms of sexual orientation, the majority identified as heterosexual (69%), 16% as homosexual, 2% as bisexual and 13% chose not, or preferred not, to identify with the categories given.

Overview

While the survey results should not be understood as comprehensive, the results offer themes for further exploration and a wide variety of perspectives on the theology of social justice advocacy in the Episcopal Church.

Many respondents claimed that social justice advocacy is at the core of the Gospel. Over and over, respondents cited scripture, tradition, prayer and liturgy—especially the Baptismal Covenant—as the foundation.

Everything about the Episcopal church and its finding the dignity in all people has informed my sense of call to work toward social justice. In living into my baptism, I find that it happens in both small and large ways, often through unplanned experiences and people met by chance or the grace of God. Each of us is called to be part of the beloved community of Christ, and without social justice, that really holds little meaning. Working toward what the church teaches and toward what Jesus calls the beloved community, requires work and above all love. That is what social justice is all about -- love and love in action.

Many respondents felt supported and encouraged in their discipleship and by the ministry of the church:

It is powerful beyond measure to exercise faith by praying with one's feet in the company of others who long for the Beloved Community to come on earth as it is in heaven. The trust that is built, the accountability that is fostered, the truth that is told, are immeasurably more real, necessary and sustaining, than what I have experienced [elsewhere].

Church resources that encourage social justice advocacy were named as support from clergy and bishops, groups of mutual support, Episcopal Public Policy Network (EPPN), Becoming the Beloved Community, Sacred Ground, ChurchNext curriculum, Community Organizing Principles and training, Asset Based Community Development Training and Episcopal Church participation in community organizing groups such as Faith in Action.

People of the church who responded to the survey described work in a variety of areas including prison ministry, police reform, immigrant detention, housing/homelessness, the death penalty, food insecurity, and public education. Activities encompassed charity, pastoral care, education and advocacy. Many did their ministry through ecumenical or interfaith organizations, or through secular ones.

Through a regional interfaith organizing group, I've had opportunities to work side by side with people different from me on, for example, getting local schools to commit to teach fuller and truer histories of race in our nation and region; helping to get local policing to better align with community values: supporting immigrants, including by accompanying them to ICE and immigrant court appointments; and developing a volunteer driver program to help get neighbors without cars to health-related activities.

When asked what or who shaped their understanding of the relationship between social justice advocacy and Christian vocation, mentors—including parents, teachers and clergy—were a frequent answer. Also cited were encounters with people from different countries or cultures. We believe one respondent captured the sentiments of many by responding “Jesus!” Some related that it was their lived experience of marginalization and injustice that formed their earliest thoughts on social justice and advocacy. Others mentioned formation programs such as Education for Ministry and other covenant groups played a part in shaping theologies of social justice advocacy. Participation in the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter movements similarly helped make this connection.

Respondents found the theological basis for social justice advocacy in the theology of creation and the incarnation, *Imago Dei* and the command to love neighbor as self. One respondent wrote:

The entirety of our sacred texts are about one thing - God's love for us, and our responsibility to model that love with one another, including ourselves - to be good stewards of all of God's creation - the earth and all that dwells on it. You cannot claim to love God, and not be a voice for the voiceless.

Challenges

When asked what people found the most challenging in social justice advocacy in the church and what the church could do better, some cited the church itself as a challenge. Wrote one, “convincing other Episcopalians that being a nice, gathered community of good liberal people is not enough.” Another wrote, “I would have no church if I preached [social justice] from my pulpit. I often feel caught between a rock and a hard place... Bishop Curry and other bishops encourage making room for all people at the table. How do I make room for both voices?”

One respondent noted:

A good start would be providing training for rectors and key parish staff in the theological basis for social justice, and in teaching this to their congregations. Basic training also would be helpful in how to discern the needs of their communities and how to work with existing resources.

Others reported the church actively discouraged discussion or activities related to social justice. And others expressed disappointment by ways in which the Church does not uphold its own calls for social justice in its institutional life or pointed to the ways our view is distorted by our primarily Western, white, colonial vision.

I would like us to do more and think about the consequences within our own parishes less. [At one church I attended] we couldn't do anything that might tick off someone. As a result, it seemed everyone but a small percentage were ticked off.

And another, on the wider Church institutions:

The entire process of leadership formation and church governance needs ... evaluation. For example, General Convention promotes and perpetuates the existence of multiple institutionalized hurdles for people of color to participate in the processes of PB&F, creating and submitting resolutions, and to find room for their voice in every aspect of our governance. People of color are still thought of as being invited into white spaces - that needs to change in itself. It's our Church, too. If you really want to welcome us, let us in and let us change you.

Critiques & Cautions

Before sending out the survey, the task force consulted with several leaders in the Church to gain their feedback and comments. These leaders noted that for some faith communities the only theology is social justice theology. We were cautioned that some respondents might be confused or put off by the survey because it addresses “social justice theology as an add-on.” While not the intention of this survey, the task force is cognizant of this shortcoming and is aware that the survey is likely to contain or perpetuate unconscious biases of the majority of respondents (white, middle/upper-middle class, heterosexual) and that it may not capture the many theologies guiding communities of the church. We also acknowledge that the survey was long and time-consuming; we appreciate the richness of the responses from all who took the time to share their stories and reflections.

Next Steps

In this report, we have just begun to scratch the surface in mining the information in this survey. We recommend this survey be made available, including translations, to other communities, seminaries and research groups to further explore the rich experiences and perspectives captured in it. We believe it can provide important information for congregational life, formation and education as well as evangelism and mission strategy.

Beginning theological implications:

Within the Anglican tradition, our way of doing theology is not mainly driven by inherited doctrines from theological giants of the past. Instead, we pray our way into our theology through the paths of praxis or experience. Therefore, our methodology in doing theology is conducive to pursue social justice advocacy, and more, as long as we avoid colluding with the Empire. The words of John Keble, a country priest, “and help us, this and every day, to live more nearly as we pray” [The Hymnal 1982, #10] articulate simply our theological and ethical methodology as a people of common prayer.

One of the through lines in Scripture from Deuteronomy to Acts is the Jubilee Year, a call for our communal life to be rebalanced and shared so that all may partake in our common life. The church participates in God’s mission by seeking to reconcile the world with each other, creation, and God.

Social justice is about right relationships among and between all of us, centering the voice and experience of the marginalized (as we read in Matthew 25), and these are the relationships that have been, and continue to be, harmed by the systemic, unjust distribution of wealth, opportunity, and privilege.

Therefore, advocating and working for social justice is a core expression of the church's mission. As we said above, social justice includes acts of mercy or charity. It also includes dismantling institutions, structures, and policies that cause harm and divide us from each other; and it includes repairing the breach by rebuilding systems of justice, fairness, and equity (Isaiah 58).

While this observation may sound here like a conclusion, it's actually just the beginning. It gets us to the beginning of our journey, not the end; it repeats what many of us have known and others have resisted knowing. In any event, it fails to point us toward possible ways to make meaningful progress. What we need to talk about, explore, discover and practice within the wider church is how we will go about dismantling structures that perpetuate unequal power.

We also need to recognize the chasm between the Task Force's understanding of our Christian call to social justice and the private pietism that turns inward, aligning one's inner life with one's perception of God's will, perhaps in expectation of reward, and on leaning away from worldly engagement and machinations, such as advocacy, as being inappropriate, lacking virtue, or even, perhaps, "un-Christian."

By contrast, the Task Force feels called to lean into the world, and into the despair that injustice produces, to call out for change. We invite the church to do the same.

We are not underlining a common, and false, duality between action and contemplation. On the contrary, prayer should lead us to get close to our neighbors' suffering, and our neighbors' suffering should lead us to prayer.

End Notes

- (1) Pew Research Center's 2014 "Religious Landscape Study," <http://pewrsr.ch/1KtFGxx> , accessed October 13, 2020.
- (2) President of the House of Deputies Gay Clark Jennings, "How long, white Episcopalians, how long?," Executive Council opening remarks, June 8, 2020. <https://houseofdeputies.org/2020/06/08/how-long-white-episcopalians-how-long-executive-council-opening-remarks/> , accessed January 18, 2021.
- (3) As quoted in "Asian Americans in the Episcopal Church, Part 1," by Kelly Wilson, Episcopal Cafe, March 21, 2019. <https://www.episcopalcafe.com/asian-americans-in-the-episcopal-church-part-1/> , accessed January 14, 2021.

- (4) "Episcopal Church in Puerto Rico implements long-term recovery strategy after Maria," by Lynnette Wilson, Episcopal News Service, September 25, 2018.
- (5) Report of the House of Deputies Committee on the State of the Church to the 79th General Convention, p. 4. https://www.episcopalarchives.org/e-archives/gc_reports/reports/2018/bb_2018-R026.pdf , accessed January 14, 2021.
- (6) Jonathan Daniels, 1939-1965. The Church Awakens: African Americans and the Struggle for Justice. <https://episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/exhibits/show/escru/jonathan-daniels> , accessed January 14, 2021.
- (7) Brief for amici curiae: The Presiding Bishop and President of the House of Deputies of the Episcopal Church; United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism; General Synod of the United Church of Christ; the Central Conference of American Rabbis; more than 700 individual faith leaders, et al. in support of employee litigants https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/17/17-1618/107139/20190703161241692_38129.pdf Moff br pdfa.pdf as reported in the TransEpiscopal Blog, 6/15/2020: <http://www.transepiscopal.org/blog/in-the-struggle-together> , accessed January 18, 2021.
- (8) Molefi Kete Asante, attributed by Ama Mazama, according to Ibrim X. Kendi, How to Be an Antiracist, published by One World, 2019, p. 167.
- (9) Reuben Varghese, MD, MPH, and Task Force member, "A Pentecost Lamentation," response to homily preached on Pentecost, May 31, 2020, at St. John's Episcopal Church, Georgetown, in the Diocese of Washington; reprinted on the House of Deputies website at <https://houseofdeputies.org/2020/06/02/a-pentecost-lamentation/> , accessed January 18, 2021.
- (10) Handbook from Save the Children Fund, as quoted in the Culture and Creativity Programme of the European Union. <https://www.culturepartnership.eu/en/publishing/advocacy-course/what-is-advocacy> , accessed January 4, 2021.
- (11) Here, as elsewhere, we hold the very concept of 'public good' up to the light: who defines it? Who constitutes the 'public'? Who decides what is 'good'?
- (12) Anush Begloian, International Expert on Advocacy and Communications of European Union-Eastern Partnership "Culture and Creativity" Programme in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, 2016-2017, video lecture, "What Is Advocacy and How Can It Help?," <https://www.culturepartnership.eu/en/publishing/advocacy-course/what-is-advocacy> , accessed January 4, 2021.

Proposed resolutions

A078 Imagining a Church Grounded in Social Justice as Christian Ministry

Resolved, the House of _concurring, That the 80th General Convention affirm:

- 1) That social justice advocacy is a primary ministry of the Church; it is our corporate, public witness to the Mission of God “to restore all people to the unity of God and each other in Christ.” [BCP Catechism, page 855];
- 2) That social justice is about right relationships among and between all of us, centering the voice and experience of the marginalized (as we read in Matthew 25), and these are the relationships that have been, and continue to be, harmed by the systemic, unjust distribution of wealth, opportunity, and privilege;
- 3) That social justice ministry includes acts of mercy or charity but also must include dismantling institutions, structures, and policies that cause harm and divide us from each other; and it includes repairing the breach by rebuilding systems of justice, fairness, and equity (Isaiah 58);
- 4) Over this past triennium, (2018-2021) the global pandemic, racial justice uprisings, and escalation of the climate crisis including extreme wildfires and storms, as well as the societal fissures and institutional failures that these events have revealed, demand we understand this to be a revolutionary moment of accountability, repentance and renewed commitments to the mission of God. We are called to account for our failures to live the words we preach and pray. We acknowledge that historical practices, policies, and structures of the institutional church have played a role in the persistence of the systemic inequality and call out for out for immediate, urgent and enduring redress;

And be it further

Resolved, That all dioceses and congregations be called upon to offer, as a normative practice at any major or public gathering, an acknowledgement of the Native/Indigenous ancestors and peoples who have lived upon and loved the land on which we now live and work, from ancient times up to the present day; as well as, based on local history and context, the people of African descent who toiled in slavery and whose coerced, unpaid labor built our churches and contributed to our financial assets, as called for in General Convention resolutions 2006-A123 and 2009-A143; and be it further

Resolved, That all dioceses and congregations be called upon to ground every planning or business meeting or convention with prayers inviting an examination of conscience regarding the specific impact of the decisions of such meetings upon those who are poor, dispossessed, disadvantaged, or marginalized, and to provide and model forms for such examination of conscience; and be it further

Resolved, That all dioceses be called upon to offer, at least once a year, a diocesan-wide event or program and liturgy to engage our congregations and members in listening to and understanding the history and current context of our diverse local communities, with attention to those who have historically been dispossessed or disadvantaged; and be it further

Resolved, That this General Convention direct the creation of a Task Force on Imagining a Church Grounded in Social Justice as Christian Ministry be formed as a diverse group to include 2 bishops, 2 priests, 2 deacons, and 10 laypersons, in order to a) consider what the church must look like if we put our vocation to love our neighbor and to be repairers of the breach at the center of our work; b) to reach out to local and diocesan groups that are doing social justice and racial reconciliation work focused on systemic change, in order to understand what resources and gifts we already have in this work and where the gaps are; c) to liaise with the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music and the Standing Commission on Governance, Structure, Constitution and Canons, the Presiding Officers' Advisory Group on Beloved Community Implementation (if it is extended in the next triennium), and other relevant interim bodies on consideration of these questions and how to address the institutional barriers to change in the church; and d) be charged with making recommendations to the 81st General Convention for institutional change to support social justice as Christian ministry in the areas of governance and structure, prayer and liturgy, catechesis and lifelong formation for discipleship, especially with laypeople and consistent with an equitable and inclusive polity; and be it further

Resolved, That the General Convention request the Joint Standing Committee on Program, Budget and Finance to consider a budget allocation of \$55,000 for the implementation of this resolution.

EXPLANATION

The 2021 Blue Book report of the Task Force on Theology of Social Justice Advocacy to the 80th General Convention provides the background for this resolution; please read the report in full. As we say in the report, this resolution is not a conclusion, but only a beginning.

\$55,000 is requested to fund this resolution:

One in-person meeting (\$27,200, estimated at \$1,700 x 16 members) of the Task Force on Imagining a Church Grounded in Social Justice as Christian Ministry;

Additional funds for task force members, in smaller teams, to carry out local site visits to congregations and dioceses doing exemplary work in training, formation, and implementation of social justice ministry; and to liaise with other interim bodies as described in the mandate (\$27,800 total: estimated at \$1,390 per meeting (assuming that the task force strive for efficiencies with local travel) x 2 members per team, x 10 meetings).