

What is social justice?

This brief article is intended to point to a selection of sources and to put a selection of opinions before you: to provoke your thinking and to help you to seek your own answers to the question: "What is social justice?"

To begin with here are some notable responses to the challenge of finishing a sentence that begins "Social Justice is..."

Social Justice is...

(from the 1993 Church leaders Social Justice Statement – see full text below)

- fairness in our dealings with other people;
- fairness in the way responsibilities are shared;
- fairness in the distribution of income, wealth and power in our society;
- fairness in the social, economic and political structures we have created;
- fairness in the operation of those structures so that they enable all citizens to be active and productive participants in the life of society.

Social Justice is...

(from various New Zealanders in 2007)

- committing ourselves to helping our neighbour. (Dr Pita Sharples)
- really about freeing people up to create their own future. (Dr Pita Sharples)
- an empathy and an understanding that people we help are people and not just a case number. (Nick Tuitasi)
- an integration of personal and social responsibility in order to build a fair and just society for all. (Lyn Campbell)

Lyn Campbell, a Commissioner with the Families Commission, takes her thinking further: "Imagine if every family took time to identify the values and standards by which it wanted to live. Imagine if children and wider family were included in these discussions to develop a clear idea of their agreed vision and mission in their community and imagine if they agreed to choose to live out a lifestyle which enabled them to monitor and evaluate their social 'return on investment' both within their family and in the wider community".

A CHALLENGE TO YOU: How would YOU finish a sentence that begins "Social Justice is..." (share your thoughts with others and 'test your answer out')

What is social justice in Aotearoa New Zealand?

The question "What is social justice in Aotearoa New Zealand?" - and the challenge of arriving at an answer to that question you could personally champion - should provoke serious reflection, thought and argument.

In a world increasingly focused on economic, social and environmental sustainability, there are many who would argue that complex issues of social justice (and injustice) will continue to gain more and more attention.

For each of us our own personal understanding of social justice has most likely developed as a result of our own life experiences and those of our family. We will all encounter, and need to contend with, a wide (political) spectrum of opinion about social justice.

Is social justice limited to issues of equality, tolerance, compassion, fairness and participation, or does it encompass other values? The fact that the address for this website is www.justiceandcompassion.org.nz, suggests an argument, for instance, that social justice cannot exist without exercising social compassion. It might equally be argued that social justice only emerges as an issue where and when there is a lack of social compassion.

Although the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services is not promoted as a social justice agency, we believe that social services sit at the intersection of social justice and 'social compassion'. Our members put justice and compassion into action.

Many Christian organisations are directly engaged in social justice issues in Aotearoa New Zealand. From within the Church member networks of NZCCSS, relevant websites include:

- www.justice.net.nz
Justice.net.nz is a social justice network for Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia.
- www.caritas.org.nz
Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand is part of [Caritas Internationalis](#), which is a confederation of 162 Catholic aid, development and social justice agencies from around the world. Caritas is the Catholic agency for justice, peace and development. Caritas can be translated as "love in action", which means that we work to make a real difference in the lives of people living with poverty or injustice. Gospel values and [Catholic social teaching](#) provide the foundation and framework for the work of Caritas.
- [Methodist Church - Cycles of Hope](#)
(www.mmn.org.nz/documents/cyclesofhoper2007.pdf (425 kb file))
The Methodist Church has a policy on social responsibility, embodied as 'Cycles of Hope', which reaffirms a commitment that encourages people to recognise we live in a changing, damaged and fragile world; to seek innovative solutions; to respond to immediate need; to enable people to achieve their own goals; to strengthen children and adults of all ages; to build

better neighbourhood; and to move from “charity” to transformation.
"Acknowledging these challenges we, the people of Te Hahi Weteriana O Aotearoa, declare again that there is an alternative way: to organise society as a neighbourhood, where we belong to each other, rather than compete against each other".

- [Presbyterian Church - Social justice and advocacy](#)
Working with ecumenical and interchurch partners the Presbyterian Church is active on social justice issues locally and in the wider community. This page features the Presbyterian Church's position on key issues like family violence and caring for creation. It provides access to media statements and letters to MPs and other officials calling for action on various issues impacting on our communities. It is also the access point for a section called "Social Justice issues in the news" and Resources - Policy and discussion papers, group study resources and suggestions on how parishes can become involved in social justice issues, with links to other Christian social justice agencies.
- [Salvation Army - Social Policy & Parliamentary Unit](#)
To help achieve change, The Salvation Army has established a Social Policy & Parliamentary Unit, based in South Auckland, to provide a focus for social research and engage with national opinion makers in politics, government, business, media and education. The unit was created expressly to work towards the eradication of poverty in New Zealand. In working to achieve this goal, it encourages policies and practices that will strengthen the social framework of New Zealand.

FOR MORE LINKS PLEASE SEE OUR [RESOURCES SECTION](#)

A CHALLENGE TO YOU: Visit the websites above, and locate at least one social justice issue you identify with

Food for thought: "Often the hardest part of social justice is simply getting started" ...

In their recent book, [Just: Imagine](#) (2008), Campbell Roberts and Danielle Strickland of the Salvation Army, express the hope that “social justice won’t be something that simply informs your mind but radically alters your life”.

They argue that “when we start to really see and experience the injustice around us, it leads to the necessity to ask deeper questions”.

The following are extracts from that book, reproduced with permission:

Often the hardest part of social justice is simply getting started.

Social justice is an idea that the world and everyone in it can live equal, safe and dignified lives... Getting beyond the trendy term, an explanation of social justice takes time. Looking into social justice is complex and includes unpacking the layers of issues surrounding it. Rather like uncovering an onion, a glimpse at social justice is complete only with tears and perseverance. But it is a painfully good and necessary journey.

To understand what social justice is, we must start by understanding injustice. For justice implies an action against something unjust... From far away, injustice often looks like an easy fix, or a generalised issue. But, if we take the time to look – to really look – we often find that injustice is a complex layering of wrongs, culminating in an individual making poor choices.

Injustice is something done (or conditions laid) that causes people (real people, with God-given capacity, gifts and talents) to suffer. To know and become friends with people, to choose to see, up close and personal, is the first step towards understanding ‘injustice’ and understanding the verse ‘He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God’ (Micah 6:8 NIV)...

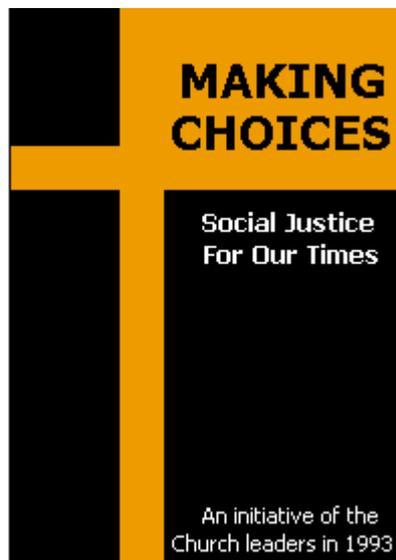
In Western countries, the public debates on economic and public policy often raise complex issues of justice... These are all debatable issues, none of them easily solved, and all requiring careful consideration of Christian thought and theology before action... At the heart of criminal and civil justice is impartiality but when it comes to social justice a far different emphasis emerges. With respect to social justice, scripture requires definite partiality or bias towards one section of the population... the litmus test of scripture on whether justice is being done is the plight of the poor and the needy in society... That is why, in scripture, meeting the needs of the poor is not seen as an act of charity but a work of justice-making... overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice.

In the interpretation presented by Roberts and Strickland, relationship is at the heart of social justice- "creating meaningful relationships with marginalised and vulnerable

people, no matter where they live, will change the way we live".

For reference:

Social Justice Statement, issued 11 July 1993



The Most Rev Brian Davis, Anglican Church

The Rev Ron Goulton, Apostolic Church

The Rev Pat Cumming, Assoc. Churches of Christ

The Rev Ian D Brown, Baptist Church

The Rev Rodney Beh, Lutheran Church

Phyllis Short, Member of Society of Friends

The Rev Keith Rowe, Methodist Church

The Very Rev Duncan Jamieson, Presbyterian Church

Colonel Arthur Thompson, Salvation Army

His Eminence Thomas Cardinal Williams, Roman Catholic Church

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God?” Micah 6:8

1. Elections are a time for debate and for making choices. They provide opportunity to examine both the policies of political parties, and the values which underlie these policies. We Church leaders welcome public debate on the values which society seeks to express through our social and economic systems. When making choices, Christians are guided by faith and by the values taught in the Scriptures and embodied in the tradition of the Church.
2. Our ten Churches have combined in this election year to reflect deep concern for one of those values: social justice. The Churches cannot avoid confronting the requirements of social justice. The commitment to social justice is an essential part of life lived according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and in response to the prophetic words found in other parts of the Bible.
3. Social Justice is:
 - fairness in our dealings with other people;
 - fairness in the way responsibilities are shared;
 - fairness in the distribution of income, wealth and power in our society;
 - fairness in the social, economic and political structures we have created;
 - fairness in the operation of those structures so that they enable all citizens to be active and productive participants in the life of society.

4. We and our Church members seek social justice because we believe that as we serve this goal we truly serve the loving purposes of God. We seek social justice because we worship a just God. We act with compassion because we worship a God who is merciful.
5. Christian faith is concerned about the whole of life and every facet of our life together in society. Life is a unity. Therefore it is our continuing responsibility to join with all people of goodwill in working for a society whose structures serve truly just ends. We ask the members of our Churches: “Do you experience New Zealand society as a fair one, and does your way of life contribute to the development of a just society?”
6. The principles which lie behind our concern for social justice are firmly rooted in the teaching of Jesus Christ and the Hebrew Scriptures. They include:
 - to respect human dignity with its rights and responsibilities;
 - to live in solidarity with others, aware of our interdependence;
 - to seek the well-being of all;
 - to value work and creativity;
 - and to give priority to the needs of the poor.
7. For New Zealand citizens a primary focus for our social justice concerns must be the special relationship which exists between Maori and all other New Zealanders. It is expressed in our founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi. The Treaty establishes a covenant relationship between Maori and the Crown and was born out of a concern for just relationships within this land. Though the Treaty has frequently been disregarded by law makers, Maori people have never forgotten it.
8. We affirm positive actions taken by recent Governments in addressing the demands of the Treaty. If we are to have a just society in this land the place of the Treaty and its potential to shape our future needs to be more widely acknowledged.
9. Therefore, whichever political party forms the next government, we Church leaders will ask it to carry out the recommendation of the Royal Commission on the Electoral System (1986) p. 112 that “parliament and Government should enter into consultation and discussion with a wide range of representatives of the Maori people about the definition and protection of the rights of the Maori people and the recognition of their constitutional position under the Treaty of Waitangi.”

Human Dignity:

I have come so that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10

10. The first principle of social justice is to support and develop structures that serve the well-being and protect the dignity of every human person. Election time will give members of our Churches an opportunity to ask candidates and political parties “Do your policies protect or undermine human dignity?”

11. Human dignity is not possible without recognition of human rights and corresponding responsibilities. Christian thinking about human rights has its origin in the conviction that all persons are created in the image of God and are to be valued unconditionally. In his relationships with a wide variety of people, Jesus showed us that the essential dignity of every person is to be respected. Jesus explicitly declared he had come "that they may have life, and have it to the full".
12. A just society recognises all citizens have a right to food, housing, clothing, rest, education, health care, employment, and security in old age. Access to these things must be on the basis of need and not be limited by a person's status in society or ability to pay.
13. Economic considerations play a part in making possible the fulfilment of human rights. The economy is measured not only by what it produces, but also by its effect on human well-being, and whether it protects or undermines the dignity of people.

While the state, much less the market, cannot meet all human needs, just government policies will be consistent with the God-given dignity of human beings and will promote and preserve conditions within which human physical, mental and spiritual well-being may flourish.
14. There are those who would argue that the Churches have no place in politics . . . that political, economic and social policies are not the business of Churches. We respond that Jesus Christ taught the primacy of love. St Paul echoed that teaching when he wrote: "So faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (I.Cor 13:13). The meaning of the word "love" does not confine it simply to acts of charity. It includes working for justice. Charitable work in the service of those in need must go hand in hand with the work to establish just structures so that citizens do not have to depend upon acts of charity.
15. Government has an indispensable role in ensuring that no citizen is deprived of human rights.
16. Today, when many are without work and social welfare assistance has decreased, individual and community acts of charity cannot meet even basic needs. The experience of the Churches' social service agencies clearly indicates that benefit levels are not adequate for many people.
17. Therefore, whichever political party forms the next government, we Church leaders will ask it to review the adequacy of all benefits, and to explore with church and community social service organisations what new initiatives are required to meet people's needs.

Relationship With Others:

**I give you a new commandment that you love one another, as I have loved you.
John 13:34**

18. The human person is fulfilled in community. We are all quite literally inter-dependent. In a truly just society this sense of community is to be encouraged and facilitated by those elected to govern.

Election time will give members of our Churches an opportunity to ask candidates and political parties: “Do your policies encourage a caring and inter-dependent society where community well-being is valued?”

19. A central emphasis in Christian teaching is the requirement that we love our neighbour with the same self-giving love that Jesus displayed for his disciples. Love binds us together in community. Love is active caring. Through loving and being loved we become mature, fulfilled persons.
20. Loving as Jesus loves us means that we cannot support pure individualism, where people are encouraged to focus only on their own interests. When economic policies, as at present, encourage selfish individualism a society is created where only the fittest or the fortunate survive, and others become helpless victims of the system.
21. Political, economic and social policies can place destructive demands on family life. The well-being of society is intimately linked to the health and vitality of family life. The family is the most basic unit of social organisation and is essential in humanising and personalising society. The impact of economic and social policies on family life must be carefully monitored. The effects on family life of unemployment, insufficient income, increased educational and medical costs, and inadequate housing are serious and require urgent attention.
22. Inter-dependence is expressed in the right and duty of all citizens to share in the shaping of the society and community in which they live. Voting in an election is one way of achieving this. We all have a responsibility to become informed on the issues facing our society and, as far as we are able, to share in the finding of solutions.
23. Government and decision-makers have a responsibility to present proposals in terms that can be understood. Wide consultation with those most affected by policy changes is not only wise, it is imperative. New Zealanders are fortunate to live within a democratic tradition, but a more participatory democracy is desirable and possible.
24. Therefore, whichever political party forms the next government we Church leaders will ask that it adopt a more consultative style of decision making.
25. Given the importance of health care we ask specifically that genuine and ongoing consultation with groups involved in the provision and use of health services take place whenever significant changes are planned.

The Common Good:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 1 Cor 12:7

26. A just society is one in which its members and its structures serve the common good. In this, government plays a vital role.

Election time will give the members of our Churches opportunity to ask candidates and political parties: “Do the policies you intend to promote serve and safeguard the common good?”

New Zealanders have a range of convictions about the precise role of government. Some hold that its only role is to ensure the nation’s security and to foster law and order. They argue for minimal government, that is government which does not intervene in areas such as health, housing, education and welfare, leaves these to private enterprise and market forces.

Others hold that government has a wider purpose. We are among them. For us, the purpose of government is to serve the common good, that is, to secure and protect the dignity of every citizen. Therefore government is to provide conditions where each is enabled to respect the rights of others, and where each can enjoy freedom and fulfilment in the economic, political and cultural life of the nation.

27. Two complementary principles guide government in securing the common good and the well-being of citizens:
- the first requires that government undertake only those activities which exceed the capacity of individuals or private groups acting independently. This is known as the principle of subsidiarity, and it calls for a combination of de-centralisation, community initiative and mutual cooperation.
 - the second requires that government assist communities and individuals to contribute more effectively to social well-being, and supplement their activity when the demands of justice exceed their capacities. This is known as the principle of supplementation.
28. The two principles can be summed up in the saying: “as much freedom as possible, as much intervention as necessary”.

This does not mean that the government which governs least governs best. It does mean that government intervention is wholly justified when it helps other social groups contribute to the common good by directing, urging, restraining and regulating political and economic activity as circumstances require and necessity demands. The precise form of government involvement cannot be determined in the abstract. It will depend upon an assessment of the specific needs of the community and the most effective way of addressing them.

29. Whatever the assessment, two extremes must be avoided:
- the totalitarian approach which allows citizens no participation, and impedes their rights; and

- the “free market” approach which places human well-being at the mercy of economic forces alone.
30. However, the task of working for the common good is not for government only. Economic and political policies are everybody’s concern. All are called to become informed, active and responsible participants in economic and political processes.
- Neither politics nor the economy are mechanisms subject to inexorable laws. Both are the outcome of human decisions. To a great extent these decisions are made by citizens acting through government.
31. It is by their votes that citizens choose representatives who will legislate to provide fair trade and work practices, care for the disadvantaged, maintain and extend the country’s infrastructure (such as reading, power supply, communications and transport), and generate employment.
32. Government may levy the taxes necessary to meet its responsibilities, and citizens have a moral duty to pay them. The amount of taxes government may justly require is a key issue. How much income individuals should be left free to use for their own needs and the needs of others, and how much tax they should be required to contribute by government decision to the common good, is constantly debated.
33. It is claimed that New Zealand’s public debt has made recent social change inevitable. Notwithstanding our country’s economic difficulties, we do not accept that there is no alternative to policy changes which create hardship. Policies which result in the gap between rich and poor significantly widening are not inevitable. They are the result of choice. If sacrifices have to be made, Government has to ensure that they are shared by all. Justice requires that both benefit and burden be shared fairly.
34. Therefore, whichever political party forms the next Government, we Church leaders ask that the equity of the present tax structure be reviewed. And it is for you Church members to require of your elected representatives that they broaden the scope of the advice they receive when determining fiscal policies, so that social impact is considered as well as economic impact.

Work:

... we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us... Romans 12:6

35. We raise also the question of work. Election time will give our Church members opportunity to ask all the parties: “Do your policies promote more jobs? Know that we will not accept unemployment as an unavoidable by-product of economic restructuring.”
36. Work is more than a way to make a living. Much less is it an impersonal factor in production. Through our work we find focus for our energy and expression

for our gifts. Our work, whether paid or unpaid, is our contribution to society. The rewards of work make it possible for us to take responsibility for our own lives and those dependent upon us, and to contribute to the welfare of others.

37. Unemployment is a tragedy. Those who cannot find work often come to feel they are worthless and without a productive role in society. Each day they are unemployed our society tells them: “We don’t need your talent. We don’t need your initiative. We don’t need you”. Unemployment takes a terrible toll on the health and stability of both individuals and families. Very few people survive long periods of unemployment without some psychological damage.
38. Workers have a right to a fair wage and good working conditions. Similarly employers have a right to a fair day’s work. We commend employers and workers organisations if they have moved beyond confrontation and towards collaboration, shared decision making, and problem solving. Employers have a vital role to play in job creation, and we commend those who have given energy to this task.
39. As a society we simply cannot afford the economic costs, the social dislocation, and the human tragedies caused by unemployment. Changes in markets, in the means of production and in management techniques require more imaginative solutions to ensure employment for all who seek it.

The goal of full employment is elusive, but addressing unemployment must have the same priority as that given to addressing inflation. No government can surrender the political will to make full employment the basis of New Zealand’s economic strategy. It cannot accept that the unemployed be left indefinitely on the margins of society.

40. Therefore, whichever political party forms the next government we Church leaders will ask that it promote new and resolute policies for the creation of full employment.

Preferential Option for the Poor:

Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me. Matthew 25:40

41. The poor and vulnerable have a special place in Christian teaching. The Scriptures tell us we will be judged by our response to “the least of these”.

The way society responds to the needs of its poor through its public policies is the litmus test of how just or unjust a society it is, and how just or unjust its government.

Election time gives members of our Churches opportunity to ask all candidates and political parties: “How do you propose to ensure that the poor are cared for adequately?”

42. The poor are not limited to those who are materially poor. They include the vulnerable: those unable to participate in society, the psychiatrically disabled without adequate community support, children who are the victims of badly

functioning families, the frail elderly, the defenceless unborn.

43. Care for the poor needs to become an integral element in economic and social policy rather than a hoped for by-product. Poverty is too common in our country and the demands on church and other helping agencies have grown enormously. Many people simply cannot afford to pay rising medical, schooling and housing costs. Maori and Polynesians, women and children are most affected.
44. Church and other community helping agencies tend to act as “ambulances” for people at the bottom of the cliff. Government elected by the people bears ultimate responsibility for safeguarding the basic well-being of all. It is to act where private initiative does not suffice by supporting the work of voluntary agencies. It is above all to choose policies which will truly serve the needs of the most needy among us. There is a dangerous tendency to project blame on to the needy as though they are the authors of their own misfortune. The truth for most is that they are the unwilling victims of systems and policies which overlook their needs. In its choice of policies and by its direct support of the needy, government should act out the collective will that no citizen of our land experience a life deprived of life’s essentials.
45. The pain and cost of economic restructuring has not been shared fairly. Too many people have become marginalised. Despair and anger are common responses.

No economic or social policy can claim to be morally neutral. Policies should serve the highest moral values, and deliberately focus on the needs of the poor. We say again: the state is not an end in itself. It exists to serve its citizens according to the purposes of God.

46. Therefore, whichever party forms the next Government, we ask it to address the plight of the poor now.

Conclusion

47. The current widespread disenchantment with the political process is a dangerous trend which serves to undermine the precious gift of democracy. In a time of despair and anger, when people feel betrayed by undeclared policies and broken promises, we hope to rediscover how New Zealand can become a more just and caring society. The welfare state is one expression of such a caring society. Though the welfare state needs to be constantly modified, its strengths should not be set aside lightly.
48. At election time all have the right to expect that political parties and candidates be honest and open, and that they share their values and vision and planned policies without empty rhetoric and without distorting alternative views.

49. Similarly, we rightly expect the media to report the election campaign in ways that give clear coverage of the positions held by parties and candidates on the major issues facing our nation.
50. We urge all of you, our church members, and all others who hear us, to become informed on current issues, to assess candidates' positions, to join with others in asserting moral values and to vote in good conscience.
51. To help you with this task we have prepared a discussion programme. It is published in a book *Making Choices: Social Justice For Our Times*, which also contains background papers written by committed members of our churches who are experts in their fields. We urge you to come together and to study this material.

We ask of you, our Church members, to act as responsible Christian citizens seeking social justice for our society.

May God bless our nation.