

Learning Session for Commissioners, October 9, 2024

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Principles of Justice

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The Theology Interfaith InterChurch committee offers to you the Principles of Justice document namely: (1) Anti-oppression, (2) Truth-telling, (3) Holistic scope, (4) Respect human dignity, (5) Full participation and decolonization, (6) Equity, Mutuality, Respect, and Reparations, and (7) Costly and Prophetic Solidarity. These seven principles constitute how the TICIF, after collectively wrestling with the different properties, facets, and dimensions of justice, understand its ministries of justice. Reminder the GC adopted these seven principles last year. I will offer to tell you then backstory of these principles by expanding on three organizing concepts: expanding on the concepts of de-colonialism, truth-telling, and prophetic solidarity, I hope to make clear that the animating spirit that inspires and moves these principles of justice is the suffering victim.

I. The spirit of the principles

Decolonization

In talking about decolonization it is imperative to acknowledge that colonization happened. The document understands colonization as firstly an event, secondly as a contemporary structure of domination; and thirdly, as something that has to be transformed. First, colonization is an event, that is intentional, not accidental. Colonialism is intentional; colonizers were inspired and empowered by governing rationalities. Meaning the colonizers did not just go eastward to look for spices and then the native population thought they were gods. I will cite two governing reasons that propelled colonialism. First is the idea of *tierra nullius*, or the assumption that the land in which the colonizers landed is empty. The assumed emptiness of the land was settlers' justification to occupy and benefit from the indigenous lands in North America. And because of that assumption, colonizers brought people from African continent to work on the land, as cheap, source of labor power made docile by the violent force of the colonial masters. Second is manifest destiny, the assumption that white Europeans were ordained by God to settle in North America. The same governing reason inspired US President McKinley to colonize the Philippines and many nations in the Caribbean and in Latin America. He said God appeared in his dream ordaining him to colonize the Philippines, because Filipinos, their "small brown brothers" are unable to govern themselves. It's always spell trouble when God appears on someone's dream. Those are just two of the most prominent governing rationalities that spurred and inspired colonialism.

It is important to bring-out and exposed and eventually to dismantle the governing rationalities that inspired colonialism because those governing assumptions became structures of domination in the contemporary time. Colonialism has evolved and has been formalized through the laws of the land and in international policies. And you would not be surprised that the same governing rationality that inspired colonizers in the past is the same governing rationality that informs the creation of laws and policies. Not only do we see the enforcement of colonial rationality but also the same colonial model is replicated in many places. Where else do we see settler colonialism happening, just like White Europeans exterminating the native population in the past? What is our assessment of the Palestine situation? And where else do we see the massive transport of people from their native countries to work on this land? They call forced migration as a form of modern-day slavery because the same governing assumptions, the assumption that the land is empty, that the white Europeans are saviors, the same governing assumption that transported Africans to New Land, inspires modern-day slavery. Consider how migrants are disposable in the framework of Canadian immigration policy. There are fewer pathways to citizenship and there are more reasons created to enable migrant deportation. Again, to reiterate the obvious, immigrants just as slavery in the past, in the eyes of the colonizers and in the present regime, are sources of cheap labor power and made docile by the forces of the state. All this to say that colonization as an intentional event, inspired by governing assumptions, as opposed to an accident, continues to this day as regulatory policies of the state.

Thus, the need to decolonize, and this is the third point about justice. Decolonization, we understand, is not a return to an idyllic past. There is no idyllic past to return to. To decolonize is first to acknowledge and expose those governing rationalities that replicates itself automatically. The decolonizing task is to prevent the automatic replication that support, strengthen, promote, uphold, legitimize colonial structures, and by creating alternative structures that will allow people who are pushed to positions of marginality to exercise their agency.

Truth

This document understands truth to be emerging from the voices of those who are suffering. The experience of suffering brings out new reasons that are oftentimes in conflict with the existing dominant reasons. These existing dominant reasons are expressed in our laws, government policies, or in our churches with the way we do our liturgies, or our Bible studies.

For example, testimonies of undocumented migrant produces new rationalities which is in conflict with the law. In the understanding of the law, they are undocumented and therefore not worthy to receive healthcare and assistance during times of crisis, not eligible for anything. This is aptly expressed by the legal framework of them being considered illegal. Immigrant solidarity movements, however, would assert that no person is illegal. In the same manner that our faith traditions inform us that every person is made in the image of God. We see the surfacing of conflict between our faith tradition and the law. Between this conflict, which do you think is the truth?

The concept of justice that these document forwards is informed by the truth emerging from the experience of suffering. Truth is privileging suffering, letting a new rationality to emerge from people who are experiencing injustice. How then do we discern truth? Discernment of truth is creating spaces for the voices of suffering to be heard.

The rise of social and sectoral movements based on shared suffering is inevitable with the creation of policies that push people to positions of marginality. Attention to emerging social movements and sectoral movements is important. New rationalities are emerging from these movements that challenge the existing notions about citizenship, state's resources, and even theology. For example, the rise of international student movements has emerged from the stricter rules on pathways to acquire work permit. Or consider the rise of political movements from racialized communities in urban centers. These movements were spurred by the realities of homelessness, food insecurity, prevalent substance abuse, among others. And this exists in stark contrast with affluent buildings and presence of big banks, and the accumulation of wealth by the already wealthy. Truth belongs to the suffering. In determining truth, we ask the critical question of where is power located. Truth emerges from the position of powerlessness. And this is very important, the reference for justice is those who are unjustly treated.

Prophetic solidarity

In the prophetic tradition of the church, the image of the prophet is almost always against the powerful. Another dimension of it is that the prophet almost always gets killed, or demonized or vilified just as in many cases of the partners of the UCC abroad. I am familiar with the many people who belongs to UCC partners in the Philippines as elsewhere that because of their stance to justice which deviates from the will of the government were killed by state forces. The subject

of solidarity is always the powerless, otherwise it is just lobbying. And this is not to impress that there is just one suffering. Our tendency is to classify every form of struggle as just one struggle, or to reduce suffering as a blanket suffering of every oppressed sectors. It is also our tendency to think of these emerging struggles as competing struggles. Our understanding of prophetic solidarity is to provide spaces for different visions of emancipation to arise.

And the prophet is never confused because the prophet knows the will of God. The prophet sees a different vision of the future that differs from the vision of the ruling order. And the reference for this vision are always the people who have been disenfranchised by systems of domination.

These are three of the main organizing concepts of the document. Expanding on these organizing concepts I hope I made clear that the center in which justice revolves around is the experience of suffering. One significant things that this document does is to give us a theological language that allows us to understand the complexities of our social environment today, that accounts history's intricacies, and yet is not confused by those complexities and intricacies. We will not be confused if we anchor our decisions and look from the eyes of the suffering victim.

Ethical Framework, based on Roger Hutchinson's Method:

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4 Stages:

1. Attention to your own initial reactions / Storytelling & Definition of the Problem

Includes naming emotions, experiences, loyalties. Your initial response, including your emotional reaction is data for further reflection. The definition of the problem is different but part of this 1st step. It may not be clear or may change later on; you may name several problems initially before one becomes clear that it is more foundational (from Chris Lind). **The role of storytelling is an integral aspect of theological and ethical reflection. We are surfacing where we're coming from, in this stage.**

How we define the problem affects what we think we should do about it, what strategies, tactics, and options there are to address/respond to the problem.

An example: in 2015, a proposal was before the General Council to have the national church divest from fossil fuel companies. Some Commissioners, some from Alberta, voiced their concern about the proposal. At that time, the price of oil had gone down; companies were downsizing; people were losing their jobs. They expressed dismay and hurt that the church would take this step as it felt like the church was abandon them at a time when they were really hurting. Their definition of the problem was the need for a pastoral response from the church.

I wasn't a Commissioner but I supported the proposal as someone who has been committed to ecological issues my entire life (and indeed my first experience of the wider church that helped me realize the church was involved in issues in the world was around environmental issues). At the same time, my brother in Calgary is an archaeologist who worked for a company that relied heavily on contracts from extractive industry companies. His job was at risk because of the downturn in the oil economy. I defined the problem as the church trying to be consistent with its expressed values and actions.

As you think about this case study, and this stage of storytelling from our own experiences, what connections do you have to this topic? What are your experiences, emotions, assumptions? How would you define the problem?

2. Description of 'facts' / Factual Clarification

Naming empirical data you are using/drawing upon; evaluating contesting data and claims; claims that can be resolved by appealing to scientific research (noting that the claims aren't debatable but that "the significance of this claim relies precisely on worldview" [Chris Lind])

Here is where we would note how many positions would have been lost; climate change stats; what the church's investments were relative to the overall bottom line for the big 5 fossil fuel

companies; impact of resource extractive industries on communities and nations around the world; social safety net in Canada; etc.

What facts come to mind for you in relation to this case study and this stage? Bear in mind these should be scientifically verifiable facts, not opinions on the issue.

3. Ethical Clarification

What do we think should be done about the situation and why. What are the value judgments being made and what are the reasons given for such judgments? What norms are used? What virtues are reflected or drawn upon? Principles, consequences, way of life, vision of the good society may all be factors described in this level.

In this case study, there could be two different understandings of the “duty” people think the church has:

- The duty of the church is to support its members and be pastoral when the members are hurting
- The duty of the church is to live out its professed values in concrete ways (ie. Not be hypocritical)

And there can be different goals/visions of the good society that can be identified here. One of those is that the “end” or “good” being sought is not harming creation more; mending of God’s world.

What norms or values would you draw on in this case study? What duty or “good”/“end” is of primary importance to you?

Our justice principles can be drawn on in this stage AND they also are part of the 4th stage, as they help to articulate United Church commitments around justice.

4. Post-ethical Clarification – identity reconsiderations.

Worldviews; religious convictions/motivations; ‘confessing one’s faith’; “ultimate issues” – underlying beliefs about human life; clarification of identities. This is a reflective stage, around checking our ethical responses against our worldview.

In this case study, we can see that there are two different worldviews that come into play here. For some, the primary worldview emphasis is a pastoral one; for others, the primary worldview is a prophetic, justice-seeking one. Our worldviews inform and influence how we respond to experiences, to emotions, to how we define the problem or issue, what facts we draw on, and what we think should be done about the situation.

****This is where I would place the principles – they are the United Church’s religious convictions/motivations. They describe for the church who we long to be, as God’s people in the world, and help to guide our actions.**

Case Studies for Small Groups:

1. Migrants

Five immigrants were victims of human trafficking. They were promised by an illegal recruiter that a job is waiting for them in Canada. They paid a hefty amount of fees, causing them to accrue a huge amount of debt. But when they arrived in Canada, there were no jobs for them, and they were left alone to fend for themselves. The recruiter went missing, and the local church pastor finds out about their situation and brought it to the council. Some of the council members are reluctant and fearful to extend help. They thought that the immigrants should be reported to police authorities because their stay is illegal, and they need to be deported. One of the council members said that because of the immigrants there are fewer opportunities for the locals. While some others said that they are a heavy burden to government resources These immigrants are attending their church. The pastor is seeking the advice of the region, what do you think should the region advise the pastor?

2. Partners abroad

One of the UCC partners abroad have been doing work around justice for peasant communities. The peasant organization in which UCC has a partnership has been mobilizing peasant people to join a protest, to pressure the government to give them the land that they have been fighting for, for decades. The owner of the land is a powerful politician whose wealth he inherited from colonial dispossession of native lands, and would not let a piece of their land be given to peasant communities. There was a history of state-sanctioned killings of activists in the community. With this knowledge, the peasant communities are militant and directly confront the state forces. Some of the peasants have joined the local guerrilla group to arm themselves for defense. Because of this, the government branded this organization as a terrorist group. This organization is known to have links with organizations that the US government have classified terrorist. The UCC has been in partnership with the peasant organization, and they are seeking solidarity statements to condemn the killing of peasant organizers. What should the UCC say? How should the UCC respond?

Études de cas pour petits groupes

1. Personnes migrantes

Cinq personnes migrantes ont été victimes de trafic humain. Un recruteur illégal leur a promis qu'un emploi les attendait au Canada, et comme elles ont dû lui verser une somme substantielle, elles ont contracté une dette énorme. Toutefois, à leur arrivée au Canada, aucun emploi ne les attendait, et elles ont été abandonnées à leur sort, le recruteur ayant disparu. Lorsqu'elle a été informée de leur situation, une pasteure a décidé de soumettre le cas de ces personnes au conseil de sa paroisse. Certaines et certains des membres du conseil se sont

montrés réticents et craintifs à l'idée de venir en aide à ces personnes migrantes, estimant qu'il fallait plutôt les dénoncer aux autorités policières parce que leur présence au Canada est illégale et qu'elles devraient être expulsées du pays. L'un des membres du conseil a en outre affirmé qu'à cause de l'immigration, il y a moins d'emplois pour la population locale, et d'autres ont même ajouté que les immigrants et immigrantes exercent une lourde pression sur les ressources du gouvernement. Les cinq personnes migrantes flouées par un recruteur frauduleux fréquentent la paroisse. La pasteure souhaiterait obtenir l'avis de la région sur la situation. Quel conseil la région devrait-elle donner à la pasteure, selon vous?

2. Partenaires à l'étranger

Un des partenaires à l'étranger de l'Église Unie du Canada mène des activités en faveur de la justice pour des communautés paysannes. Cette organisation paysanne avec laquelle l'Église Unie du Canada a noué un partenariat s'efforce de mobiliser la population paysanne locale afin qu'elle prenne part à des manifestations visant à faire pression sur le gouvernement pour qu'il lui concède des terres pour lesquelles elle se bat depuis des décennies. Le propriétaire de ces terres est un puissant politicien dont la fortune est un héritage de la dépossession coloniale de la population autochtone, et il ne concédera aucune parcelle de terre aux communautés paysannes. Lorsqu'une histoire d'assassinats de militants et militantes sanctionnés par l'État a commencé à circuler, les communautés paysannes se sont mobilisées pour manifester et affronter directement les forces de l'État. Certains paysans se sont joints à la guérilla locale pour se procurer des armes et ainsi pouvoir se défendre. Face à cette situation, le gouvernement a qualifié l'organisation de groupe terroriste, et celle-ci est par ailleurs reconnue pour avoir des liens avec d'autres organisations classées comme étant terroristes par le gouvernement des États-Unis. L'Église Unie du Canada a un partenariat avec cette organisation paysanne, et cette dernière a lancé un appel à des déclarations de solidarité condamnant l'assassinat des organisateurs paysans. Que devrait dire l'Église Unie du Canada? Comment devrait-elle réagir?