

# Clarifying the Vision for Social Justice

## Our Concern for Social Justice

Concern for social justice—locally, nationally and internationally—has always been part of Cedar Ridge’s identity. Our vision calls us to work as agents of love, peace and hope; to serve our neighbors, care for the poor, and help the oppressed; to live simply and ethically, and treasure the earth; and to reach out beyond global, cultural and political barriers to offer friendship and practical support. Aspects of this vision provided the impetus to hold regular, churchwide Days of Service, establish the farm, and develop partnerships in Ipala, Guatemala.

More recently, in January 2015, Cedar Ridge embarked on a challenging discipleship series entitled, *Justice for All: Embracing the Message of Amos*. This series was, in part, a response to racial injustice exposed through the tragic deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner, amongst others. The series sought to also explore the (often interlinked) issue of economic injustice, as well as the role of religion in both perpetuating and combating such injustices.

This was followed by another discipleship series, *Reconciliation in a Time of Fear: Becoming a Movement of Love, Peace and Hope*, which focused on how we—as followers of Jesus—should respond to racial injustice, economic injustice, religious intolerance, and violence. Throughout the series, feedback was solicited as to what steps we should take as individuals, in small groups, and as a community, and this feedback was prioritized through discussion and exercises at a churchwide forum held in June, 2015. Through this process, members of Cedar Ridge expressed a great deal of commitment to (and excitement for) engagement in issues of social justice, specifically in the areas of racial reconciliation and economic justice, as well as a desire for relationships with other faith communities. Feedback also highlighted the need to integrate and build upon our ongoing social justice initiatives: namely the Cedar Ridge farm, our work in Guatemala, and our longstanding ties with Greencastle Elementary School (GCES).

Two new teams were formed in the summer/fall of 2015—the Racial Reconciliation Team (RRT) and the Economic Justice Team (EJT), both of which needed time to build cohesion and momentum around a clear goal and objectives:

- The RRT established the following goal, which was affirmed by the Pastoral Team: “Rooted in our conviction that reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel, we seek to deepen our awareness/understanding of historic and current racial issues that cause pain and inequities in our community. We seek to create a safe and inclusive space where we can have open and honest dialogue about race so we can better understand the significance of diversity in the world, and empower and equip our community to live out God’s vision of peace and justice.”
- The EJT defined its aim as follows: “At Cedar Ridge, we follow someone who demonstrated immense compassion for those who in need. Jesus saw illness, poverty and pain, and reached out in love to people who were suffering. Our pursuit of the way of Jesus leads us to stretch beyond our own needs and look out for the needs of others. The EJT therefore seeks to explore

economic justice issues in our local area and find where Cedar Ridge Community Church can make a lasting, sustainable, practical and relational impact. This impact will be achieved through connections made in our community, our service days, our farm deliveries, and partnerships with other area organizations.”

## Recent Social Justice Initiatives

In the last year or so, both teams have held a number of one-off events and implemented ongoing activities.

### 1. Racial Reconciliation Team

- 2016 Martin Luther King Jr. Day event, attended by more than 50 people
- Monthly prayer circle for racial reconciliation attracting between 15 and 30 people each month
- A 3-hour training for the Pastoral Team on how to support racial reconciliation and increased diversity, equity and inclusion at CRCC
- Presentation of “Whitewash” as part of the summer God in the Movies series, which gave churchwide exposure to the issue
- *Just Mercy* book discussions, attended by 15 people
- Inclusion of examples of civil rights leaders in the Fruit of the Spirit series, again providing churchwide exposure
- *Crucial Conversations* workshop, which drew 18 participants
- *How We Got Here: The Racial History Behind Today’s Headlines* workshop, which attracted 37 people

### 2. Economic Justice Team

- Screening of 3 *Street Sense* short films and interviews with film makers, attended by approximately 50 people
- Screening of *A Place at the Table*, 45 attendees
- 80 handwritten thank you cards with movie theater gift cards delivered to the staff at GCES
- 10 complete Thanksgiving meals donated to GCES families
- 25 holiday gifts for children in need at GCES, donated during winter break
- Teams of 6-8 people served at Shepherd’s Table on the first Saturday of each month
- 35-40 food kits prepared each month as part of the GCES food in backpacks program since August 2016
- Over one ton of fresh produce distributed to six organizations through bi-weekly deliveries
- Birthday bags delivered to children in three elementary schools

Additionally, in the area of interfaith initiatives, 25 people from Cedar Ridge participated in the Interfaith Holiday Celebration hosted by the Idara-e-Jaferia in December 2016. On Martin Luther King Jr. Day 2017, Cedar Ridge hosted a screening of the “I Have A Dream” speech, followed by remarks from a panel of leaders from different faith communities. Approximately 140 people attended. This event was a collaborative effort between the EJT and RRT, with a strong interfaith component.

## Guiding Themes

A number of guiding themes have emerged through the work of the RRT and EJT, which have their foundation in the two discipleship series from 2015. These themes are likewise consistent with documents drawn up by the initial Global Engagement Team and Farm/Property Team.

### 1. Justice and Mercy

In keeping with the prophetic spirit of Jesus, we long to see justice prevail. Marginalization and oppression of others is an insult to the God in whose image we are all created, and we are called to stand alongside our sisters and brothers in the cause of justice. We also gratefully embrace the boundless mercy and grace of Jesus, who touched outcasts, healed foreigners, declared the meek blessed, and identified himself with the hungry, homeless, sick and imprisoned. In all our social justice initiatives, therefore, we want to reflect both justice and mercy, and eschew any activities that undermine the voice, dignity or power of marginalized people.

### 2. Humble Partnership

As followers of Jesus, we recognize that we are one with God and therefore with one another. Systems and situations that oppress or exploit people are an aberration of our intimate connection to one another in God. We therefore approach social justice issues with humility and repentance, acknowledging our complicity in systems of oppression. We do not presume that we have all the answers to injustice, or the ability to “solve” these issues. We recognize our dependence on God, and are grateful for the opportunity to join with others in God’s work of reconciliation. All social justice initiatives should therefore be grounded in and supported through prayer. In all the busyness of organizing and “doing,” we remember that God is already at work, and we surrender to God’s transforming presence in us, as well as in our world.

### 3. Meaningful Relationships

As with all of our ministry areas, the work we do around social justice should be rooted in honest and mutually accountable relationships. Our focus is not on impersonal activities or one-off transactional interactions, but on meaningful, ongoing relationships through which we can grow, serve and experience community. We will therefore seek to partner with likeminded organizations and communities to pursue justice and assist the poor and vulnerable, and we will invest time and resources into strengthening these partnerships. We will also ensure that we make safe space within our community for all of us to learn about justice issues, identify our own role in perpetuating injustice, and join with others to “make the world a better place.”

### 4. Local Connections

While our concern for social justice is global, given our focus on deep and meaningful relationships, we expect our initiatives to have local connections. We will seek to partner with locally based likeminded organizations and communities to address social justice issues. We will continue to invest in our longstanding relationship with GCES, and will build relationships with farm food recipients. We will partner with county and local initiatives to promote racial reconciliation, and strengthen friendships with neighboring faith communities. And we will find creative ways to increase our connection to Guatemalans living in Maryland.

## 5. Integrated Activities

We do not want our various social justice initiatives to compete for time, attention and resources. Rather, we want racial and economic justice and religious understanding (locally, nationally and internationally) to be viewed as mutually reinforcing. As we design activities, plan events and develop relationships, we should do so with a holistic social justice perspective, rather than as the RRT, EJT, Guatemala team or farm team.

## 6. Churchwide Involvement

Social justice is central to the heart of the gospel and should therefore be an integral part of discipleship at Cedar Ridge. We will inform and challenge people through Sunday messages, stories and announcements, discipleship series, events, and hard and softcopy materials. We will be intentional about creating safe space for people to ask questions, develop skills, and find simple ways to get involved. We will use churchwide days of service to encourage people to step outside of their comfort zone and to form new relationships. And we will actively encourage children and youth to play a lead role in developing and participating in social justice activities.

## Emerging Topics

Although concern for social justice has long been an integral part of our identity as a community, only in the last two years have we intentionally developed teams and plans to identify and address local issues of economic and racial injustice. To date, three topical areas have emerged as priorities from the EJT and the RRT, and these areas also build on priorities for our work in Guatemala and with the farm. These areas of focus may shift as we grow in our understanding of social justice issues, deepen our partnerships with other organizations, draw more of our members into this work, and seek to be responsive to changes in our socio-political environment.

### 1. Food

Despite the relative wealth of Montgomery County,<sup>1</sup> poverty and food insecurity are widespread and growing problems. In 2013, approximately 70,000 county residents received benefits through the Food Supplement Program (formerly known as “food stamps”), more than double the number from 5 years earlier;<sup>2</sup> and it is estimated that this represents only 46% of people eligible for these benefits.<sup>3</sup> There is strong intersectionality between economic status and ethnicity; and fears associated with being undocumented prevent many families from applying for the benefits to which they are entitled. In a world that produces more than enough to feed the global population, access to healthy food is a fundamental justice issue. One of the most common pictures of the Kingdom of God in Scripture is of a banquet, where everyone shares in the abundance. In contrast, we live in a world driven by profit that wastes a third of the food that is grown, and denies sustenance to the poor and vulnerable.

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<sup>1</sup> Maryland is the wealthiest state in the U.S. as measured by median household income, and Montgomery County is the second wealthiest county in the state. 37,150 children live in “food insecure” households, and more than 1 in 3 public school students qualify for free and reduced price meals. 6.7 % of seniors live below the poverty line.

<sup>2</sup> Maryland Hunger Solutions website.

<sup>3</sup> Maryland Hunger Solutions and the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, cited in 2014 Maryland Poverty Profiles, Maryland Alliance for the Poor.

One way we express our concern for food justice is through the farm, which grows between one and two tons of fresh, organic produce each year—all of which is donated to people experiencing poverty and hunger. This concern is also expressed through our participation in the Food in Backpacks program at GCES, which provides basic, nonperishable foodstuffs to families that are food insecure. In addition, childhood nutrition is an emerging area of focus for our work in Guatemala. Currently, all of this work is more associated with the direct delivery of food to those in need than to education and activism around the root causes of hunger and malnutrition.

## 2. Education

Education has been shown to decrease poverty,<sup>4</sup> as well as to reduce crime, improve health, lower mortality, and increase political participation.<sup>5</sup> Educating girls and young women significantly reduces infant and child mortality.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, children living in poverty are far less likely to complete school for many reasons (hunger and health-related absenteeism, lack of access to preschools, low levels of parental engagement, fewer educational resources, etc.). Again, there is a strong degree of intersectionality among educational attainment, ethnicity and economic status.<sup>7</sup>

Our concern for the growing educational achievement gap in neighborhoods close to Cedar Ridge is reflected in our longstanding relationship with GCES—which should be a Title 1 school (eligible for federal financial assistance due to the high percentage of children from low-income families), but is not so designated because many families are undocumented minorities who are afraid to claim free and reduced price meals. Our Guatemala work focuses primarily on educational access, and each year we award scholarships to young students, and contribute to the cost of school construction and educational materials. In light of this focus, the RRT recently began action research in the area of racial discrimination in education.

## 3. Justice System

A third emerging area, which has not yet gained as much traction within our community as the issues of food and education, is racial and economic bias in the justice system—such as police misconduct, and use of bail. Such bias is by no means a new problem, but it has received additional attention in recent years due to video evidence, media attention, and more widespread moral outrage than in times past. As a community that longs to reach out beyond global, cultural and political barriers as agents of love, peace and hope, we are compelled to stand with those who fear law enforcement and legal systems and personnel because of the color of their skin, religious affiliation, or country of origin. We value Cedar Ridge as a safe space for honest and compassionate interaction on a wide range of issues; and we hope to offer this safe space for dialogue between the police and the communities they serve.

We have sought to make careful but steady progress in this politically contentious area—making space for discussion and prayer, seeking to educate ourselves through books and personal stories, and challenging everyone to stand with the fearful, vulnerable and oppressed. As we strengthen our ties to

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://poverty.ucdavis.edu/faq/how-does-level-education-relate-poverty>

<sup>5</sup> Lochner, L. (2007). *The Impacts of Education on Crime, Health and Mortality, and Civic Participation*. Retrieved from <http://voxeu.org/article/wide-ranging-benefits-education>

<sup>6</sup> Fischetti, M. *Female Education Reduces Infant and Childhood Deaths*. Scientific American. July 7, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-education-and-poverty-america>

other faith communities in our neighborhood, as well as to families at GCES, this issue is certain to become more of an immediate priority, given the realities of the change in political administration. The RRT is proposing to conduct action research in the area of implicit bias in the justice system.

## Priority Activities

In light of the above guiding themes, we have identified the following as priorities for the coming years.

- **Motivate our community to pursue justice and mercy**  
A commitment to social justice can easily become a source of anger and bitterness, or a way to feel superior and self-righteous. To guard against this, we will continue to promote—through Sunday messages, study material, blog posts, corporate prayer and other means—an understanding of our oneness with all of humanity, as well as God’s own heart for justice, mercy and reconciliation.
- **Increase congregational understanding of social justice issues**  
Injustice thrives on ignorance and false narratives. We will continue to invest in educating our community and those with whom we partner through documentary screenings, book discussions, workshops and other events. In addition, we will intentionally make safe space for sharing personal stories, and discussing what we are learning in an atmosphere of love and empathy, rather than judgment.
- **Increase CRCC’s commitment to pray for social justice**  
Scripture clearly reveals how God cares passionately for the plight of the poor, vulnerable and oppressed. However much our hearts are moved by unjust situations, we can be certain that God’s own heart is moved to an infinitely greater degree. Through prayer, we acknowledge our total dependency on God, surrender our burden of grief and frustration, and seek wisdom, strength and courage. We will model the need for prayer in our events and activities, and continually exhort one another to pray for our hurting world.
- **Equip our community with facts, tools and approaches to productively engage in discussions related to social justice issues**  
Challenging others in a loving way is difficult, particularly in the context of emotionally charged issues such as racism, religious intolerance, and economic disparity. As a community, we value being accepting and non-judgmental, while also standing with the poor and oppressed. We will equip people to manage this tension through workshops, discussion groups, and other resources.
- **Identify ways for CRCC to strategically act, including through partnerships with other groups**  
Motivation, education and prayer inevitably lead to a desire to act. Through research, and consultation with other groups engaged in locally relevant social justice issues, we will prayerfully identify ways we can engage in priority issues (such as food, education and/or law enforcement) in focused and meaningful ways that are consistent with and strengthen our identity as a community.

- **Increase the number and depth of relationships between CRCC members and people of different faiths, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds**  
Opinions are much more profoundly changed as a result of personal experience than through debate. Recognizing the immense value of being directly exposed to other views and life experiences—and reflecting the desire for a relational basis for all our social justice work—we will encourage people to develop diverse relationships, and create venues to facilitate this. Examples of initiatives include multi-faith social events, service projects that build sustained relationships, and partnerships with likeminded but demographically diverse organizations.

## Recommendations:

### 1. Nurture compassionate activism

- Promote engagement in social justice outside the CRCC setting as part of everyday discipleship
- Facilitate individual engagement through informational resources on local organizations, events, opportunities, etc.
- Encourage people to adopt an ethical and socially aware lifestyle—not just attend events or undertake discrete activities

### 2. Move increasingly towards empowering approaches

- Engage in advocacy around priority issues
- Seek greater partnership with food recipients (to volunteer on the farm, assist with deliveries, start their own gardens, etc.)
- Seek to apply community development best practices in Guatemala

### 3. Be more relational

- Develop stronger relationships with food recipients, GCES, and Guatemalans here in Maryland
- Identify partners for racial reconciliation work in education and law enforcement
- Build friendships with other faith communities
- Continue to make space for sharing personal stories

### 4. Increase integration of social justice initiatives

- Hold combined meetings with the various teams engaged in social justice issues
- Coordinate the development of annual plans
- Make a conscious effort to look for synergies

### 5. Make social justice a churchwide priority

- Ensure intergenerational involvement
- Involve discipleship groups
- Tie in with service day projects
- Make social justice prominent in communications