

Social Injustice Now

Introduction to injustice

I just checked email and daily reports from “ReliefWeb” came in; one story struck me about Sierra Leone where we worked from 2004 – 2008. This nation is listed by the Human Development Index (HDI) as the least developed country with major problems in health care especially for mothers and children. It’s one of the most dangerous spots in the world for a pregnant woman or a child under 5. It’s also a place and people that won our hearts; why is there so much injustice and suffering?

Part of the article reads:

Sierra Leone, 27 October 2009 – Lack of access to affordable health care is one of the major contributing factors to pregnancy and childbirth-related deaths in Sierra Leone.

Several development reports, notably the UN Human Development Index, consistently indicate that Sierra Leone is one of the world’s most dangerous places for a woman to be pregnant and a child to be born. According to the Sierra Leone Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey conducted in 2005, as many as 495 out of 100,000 women die during delivery, while 267 out of 1,000 children die before they turn five. These grim figures are a result of poverty and deprivation, partly caused by the country’s decade-long civil war, which destroyed its health infrastructure.

A nationwide assessment of emergency obstetrics and newborn care – undertaken in 2008 by the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, and UN agencies – found that the state of maternity services for labour and delivery was poor throughout the country.

Lack of facilities

This situation results from a serious lack of both physical facilities and human resources. In addition, the fees charged for maternal and neonatal health services are too high.

"When we go to the hospital, we are not treated because we don't have money. If you don't [pay], you will not be given medicine," said one woman in Koinadugu...

(By Umaru Fofana and Karolina Roiha; source UNICEF; www.reliefweb.org)

The story notes the response by UNICEF in building clinics, providing training and supporting health care, especially for pregnant women and children under 5 years old.



Social injustice and “sin”

One of the projects I was responsible for during our time in Sierra Leone was a surgical center where women received a free surgery for a condition called obstetric fistula. This is a child birth injury as a result of obstructed labor.

During the prolonged birthing process the baby dies and the woman’s bladder develops a hole, resulting in life long incontinence. Women with a vesico vaginal fistula (VVF) often smell

of urine and lead a life of rejection and marginalization. The conditions described in the article contribute to the cause of the fistula problem. It was a fulfilling experience to provide these ladies with a hope giving surgery in our center. When they went home on “gladi-gladi day” with celebration, dancing and singing they had a new lease on life. But why did they suffer so much in the first place, why were they victims of an unjust system?



We also ran an outpatient clinic for children under 12 where early morning a long line would form with women waiting with their little ones for an “almost free” consultation, medication and lab tests. Many little lives were saved not just because of a good humanitarian cause but because we believe it is our mandate from God to show the people who suffer that there is a God who loves and wants (us) to reach out to them.

Right now I’m back in Holland and working on a study program; my current course includes “Hamartiology” a study of man and sin. Highlights for me include the belief that all people are created in God’s image and that humans are the crown of creation with responsibility to care for God’s creation as good stewards. Yes, we are all special and have tremendous value... but human suffering also plays a major role in the world.

What happened? Mankind – starting with Adam – chose to “go astray” and no longer follows God’s principles and in doing so humanity is “missing the mark” (both terms for “sin”) and this includes our broken relationship with God and problems such as selfishness, greed, conflicts with others, wars among peoples, power struggles, poverty, hunger, corruption, human trafficking, pollution, climate change, and the list can go on both on an individual and social level.



During our years in Africa – and sometimes in “the west” – we became more aware of social injustice. I was glad to see that my course devoted a chapter to the issue of “Sin – the social dimension”. So often many Christians seem mostly concerned about personal issues of faith and their individual relationship to God. Many seem to forget that there is a suffering world out there with people who live in inhuman, unjust and abject conditions. Not only poverty and hunger but also lack of

healthcare and education, are often a result of unjust and corrupt power systems. A social elite hangs on to power and a corrupt political and economic system that keeps many people poor and deprived. A newer dimension is a resurgence of human trafficking especially children for unjust labor or sex slavery. That’s the idea of “Social Injustice Now = SIN”.

In our western societies we see “social sin” and injustice in areas like racism, sexism and various forms of discrimination. Some causes are selfishness, bias and hatred. Living in

Holland right now I notice stronger feelings and opinions in a mixture of fear and hatred against “immigrants” especially against those from other religions and races.

Looking back at places we lived in Africa I believe there is a role for the church and individual believers to make a difference. There are many passages in the Bible where we are called to stand up against injustice, to protect the poor and the needy, to look after the widows and orphans, take care of the sick, the hungry and basically to follow the example of Jesus and to reach out to them in compassion.



In Sierra Leone we also worked with people who have physical disabilities such as polio and amputees, the latter often victims of the civil war. “Polios” would tell me about discrimination and sometimes be refused access to taxis or buses. Children with polio would be labeled as “troublesome” by some teachers. On the other hand, through our programs and through empowering these precious people we saw that many

beneficiaries became victors rather than victims. Polio children at the top of their class, amputees played football on the beach and competed in international matches in the national football stadium, in front of TV cameras. These friends are some of my greatest heroes in Africa and the world. For us these were not just projects but people with value and created in God’s image. We are enriched to have been involved in their lives.

I will use just two of many Bible passages to illustrate the importance of social justice from God’s perspective:

In Psalm 82:2-3 we read: "How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed." This is both a question and a command; the choice is ours to make, whose side are we on?

In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus tells a parable about the final judgment for the nations. They all come before the judgment throne and the people are separated in two sides, as a shepherd in those days separates the sheep and the goats. Then it’s so interesting what kind of criteria God uses in his judgment; is it personal faith, opinions or beliefs people had, things they have said, even how badly they might have sinned?

This is what Jesus sums up as God’s criteria, his measuring stick, and his benchmark for being part of His Kingdom:

³⁴"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'"

Those who are praised wonder when they did these things. The answer: ⁴⁰"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Of course the "goats" did not do any of these "acts of mercy" and are condemned on the basis of their actions or inaction in regards issues of social injustice.

Conclusion – what's next?

When I reflect on my recent study I realize I have a responsibility to maintain a right relationship with God, to confess and repent from my "going astray", to receive God's grace and forgiveness for what I have done against His principles. Based on this belief and hope I want to follow Jesus' example and do what the "sheep" from the parable did. Show God's love and mercy to those in need and to see acts of love as done unto God himself. As we are in a personal phase of transition, wondering about God's path for our future, I want this to be my motivation to continue in the service of God, the poor and the needy. I want to stand up against injustice, social sin, poverty and hopelessness in a world full of suffering. We want to be His hands and feet to work and walk with the poor. We pray that He will lead us on the next steps in our journey.

Photo's taken by: Linda May Kallestein and Justin C. Hane

Links to Videos:

Outpatient clinic for children under 12 in Sierra Leone:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u79rmV_Aqdw

Amputee football in Sierra Leone; some of my heroes:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5p8xnPMttGU>

New Steps staff serving people with disabilities in Sierra Leone:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Vf8meivJkQ>

Fistula survivors singing and dancing celebrating successful surgery:

<http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=justinhane#p/u/38/CoVCL2SdmVc>