



Social justice: An obligation or an optional extra for Christians?

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Introduction

In some places and in some periods of history the Church has exercised a direct and detailed political and social control. At other times intervention in economic and political matters has been very slight. At the present time, I hope I would not be alone in my assessment of Australia in suggesting that most Christians and church traditions recognise that the individual, as a citizen in a democracy, is under obligation to act as a good citizen, but fewer would agree that the Christian community ought to accept a measure of social and political responsibility within the community.

I come as a Uniting Church Minister and also as the ninth Superintendent of Wesley Mission. A third strand of influence is twenty-five years as a Methodist Minister, where the holding together of evangelism and social justice was a consequence of my belief and practice. Such an emphasis comes naturally to the movement which was founded by John Wesley in the eighteenth century – and subsequently spread across the whole world.

Wesley Mission has grown from its early days and traces its roots to 1812 and some of those early Methodists selected by the finest judges in England! Today the same organisation has grown into a \$170 million operation employing 3000 staff and as many volunteers.

The Methodist Conference held in 1884 was pivotal in the story of Wesley Mission. They were close to reaching a decision to sell the York Street Chapel and spend the considerable sum of money that would come from the sale – it was a good site for warehouses – out in the suburbs, building churches for the growing suburban population. W G Taylor, the minister appointed as a last gasp attempt to save Methodism in the city centre, told of how a George Hurst jumped to his feet and cried in righteous anger, “Sell it? Never! God helping us ... never!” He went on to ask, “... is Methodism bankrupt?”

The problems the church faced were on many fronts –

- Declining numbers, because of the changing demography of the city.
- An inadequate itinerant system of ministry could never tackle the problems of a growing city. Ministers were moved on to the next appointment after only a couple of years; hardly time to get to grips with the challenge of a rapidly changing city.
- An agriculturally-based parish ministry had no leadership that in any way expressed urban theology.

The development of the work of Wesley Mission has been well told, but for many years the philanthropic work of the Mission in W G Taylor’s day was, as Dr Don Wright put it, “... an adjunct to its evangelism, an aid to it. Like many nineteenth century Protestants, they felt that useful social reform could only come from individual conversion and not from political action. However, being a good Methodist, he did make an exception in the case of the Temperance Movement and he joined in political action there.”

‘Word and deed’ together: Australian evangelicals and social justice

The recession of the 1890s, the organisation of labour, the development of political parties and the growth in the role of the State provided philosophical challenges to the philanthropy of all mainstream churches. Some retreated whilst others chose to engage and adapt.

Down the years, notably during the Great Depression and after the Second World War, Wesley Mission recognised the need to apply the gospel to the specific circumstances of our society. The Mission took a much braver approach, as it looked at what it meant to be a Mission in the twentieth century. Alan Walker struck a note that has defined the Mission to this day: “A whole gospel for a whole world”.

I stand soundly in the evangelical school of theology, which has always underpinned Wesley Mission. I hold with strong conviction the need for conversion, the desire for Christian holiness and the importance of scripture as our final call on all authority. However, I have come to a place of confidence about socio-political obligations and activity of the Church. I am sure that the gospel brings a new beginning into both the life of the Christian and the world. The Word speaks to the individual and to the society. It calls us to act with both heart and mind.

Wesley Mission has developed its understanding of its ministry in holding together the twin concepts of Word and Deed. Jesus conveyed the Good News in terms of repentance and faith whilst calling for wholeness of life. And, as the former Professor of Ancient History at Macquarie University Edwin Judge has pointed out, the Early Church was radical in its treatment of the marginalised and dispossessed.

It was this very conviction that empowered the Christian community to stand ‘on the edge’ of the great social issues of each generation. The failure of some Christians to hold Word and Deed together has cost the Church dearly.

In the not too distant past, critics would label some Christians as being ‘so heavenly-minded that they were of no earthly use’, the inference being that they either talk or pray too much, whilst doing very little. There is a new set of divisions amongst Christians. The old denominational feuds (Catholic versus Protestant, etc.) have largely disappeared and we are thankful to God for that. However, there is one fresh and continually emerging division between those who focus on religion as an experience and a social culture – and those who prefer some kind of political activism. These two aspects need to be readdressed.

An authentic Christian discipleship must hold together Word and Deed. Indeed I am bound to suggest that the most startling teaching of Jesus about ‘the final judgement’ (Matthew 25: 31-46) is derived from how we treat others.

Christian responsibility to society

The Inaugural Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia marked its inception by making a Statement to the Nation. This was on the occasion of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches coming together as a new Church in 1977. There was an acknowledgement of the contribution from the constituent denominations that now formed the new Church and in that Statement the following relevant point was made:

A Christian responsibility to society has always been regarded as fundamental to the mission of the Church. In the Uniting Church our response to the Christian gospel will continue to involve us in social and national affairs.

I want to use five aspects of how this might engage us today, but make two remarks before doing so. First, the recent Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade celebrated the Clapham Sect and the work of John Venn, John Newton and others, as well as most importantly William Wilberforce. It is important to acknowledge that these were evangelicals, but far from recognisable as social activists today. However, they achieved an enormous amount which was built upon by succeeding generations.

Second, we must not believe that political activism is only necessary when one particular political system or party is in power of government. I came to Australia from a political context which had campaigned for years against a Conservative background that often acted as though there was no such thing as 'society'. You might imagine that under a Labour Government the situation in Britain would radically change. Not so! – and the Christian voice has never been more needed. This is a word of warning to all of us, because whoever holds power needs to hear the prophetic voice of the Christian community, which speaks for those who have no voice. Social justice transcends party politics.

The obligation upon us as a Christian community is to live out the Christian life in such a way that allows us to hold together a number of those principles outlined in the Uniting Church 1977 Statement to the Nation – “To remind our community of the importance of every human being.”

1. The importance of every human being

At the heart of the teaching of Jesus is the importance of the individual. In a society where the gap between rich and poor widens and people feel disempowered, those who stand to lose most are individuals and especially the poor and marginalised.

Our commitment to justice for the individual must never be lost. Each week, within the programmes of Wesley Mission, our doors are knocked upon by individuals whose lives are destroyed by a greedy society bent on looking after itself – and not the needs of the weak. One of the key biblical ideas of justice is “right relating” – for justice requires a right relationship with God, our neighbour, our society and the earth itself.

One of the most significant biblical passages has to be the Magnificat (Luke 1 : 46-54). In this Song of Mary, she declares that the ministry of Jesus is within the prophetic tradition which challenges the powerful and overthrows the unjust structures. In the same Gospel of Luke, there are endless examples of how we are surprised by the person who reveals the right response and the God response. Each person has been given dignity and worth by Christ. This is a non-negotiable starting point for all social justice.

We are still engaged in helping individuals in need. Last year alone we helped 884 people with crisis accommodation in Surry Hills, provided 12,069 days of accommodation in our rehabilitation programmes for drug and alcohol abuse. Ten thousand people were helped with debt counselling and so on and so on...

I remember as a young minister being told that the Church is responsible, at least in part, for the culture in which its own message is ignored. Social justice can be locally or globally focused. We more often prefer the latter. All social justice action targets the marginalised to provide a framework which will help the victims of injustice, the disadvantaged and those who are discriminated against.

Jesus identifies with those most in need of support and help. The gospel he preached and exemplified shows the power of this world in the hands of the weak. Our motivation as Christians to uphold social justice is a recurring call to love. We remind people that all individuals are endowed with human dignity and such conviction drives us in the continuing struggle, which is our experience of the Kingdom of God.

There are particular issues which arise for the Christian community when it is working within a political system. We must be careful not to become so much an ally of one system that we are robbed of our power to speak for the poor.

2. The need for integrity in public life

I have just been going through a process of developing a values-based strategy for the future of Wesley Mission. During the first year, which has just concluded, I explored about a dozen important values with our Senior Staff. We have now distilled those values into three –

- Christlike servanthood
- Unfailing integrity
- Courageous commitment

As you can imagine, it was the adjectives that caused the most conversation, plus the use of the word 'integrity'. We looked for other terms, as we recognised that integrity appeared high on the list of some of the most materialistic of company values and business plans. However, integrity is vital to all that we do.

We must be clear that whilst we call for integrity in public life, the Church itself has not been the best example of the quality that we look for in others. We must always call from below and never see ourselves as the power-broker. The Beatitudes of Jesus (Matthew 5:1-12) are the greatest reminder of the attitude of the Christian in a strange world.

Charles Elliott, who headed up Christian Aid for a number of years, received the Collins' Biennial Book Award for his inspirational "Praying the Kingdom" which looks towards a political spirituality. Elliott explores the Beatitudes and suggests a very simple interchange of words and ideas by recommending that when we read the Beatitudes we should substitute the words "Blessed are ..." or "How happy are ..." with the words "You are in the right place when you are ..."

William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury who, in his book *The Church Looks Forward*, written in the dark days of 1944, wrote, "There are large proportions of our fellow citizens for whom the bottom is liable to fall out of life through no action of their own, but simply through the way in which our economic system is worked or works, and it is a shocking evil and we must fight against it."

The fact that we deliver services means that we can also "speak from whereof we know" and we can talk about the real world, for example Lifeline in 1991 was quick to pick up from its calls that the "recession that we had to have" was going to be deeper and longer than Prime Minister Paul Keating suspected.

3. The proclamation of truth and justice

The Christian community is called to be prophetic. When Jesus began his public ministry, he returned to Nazareth and, when he was invited to read from the scriptures, he chose Isaiah 61: 1-2. The account in Luke 4 shows that Jesus was rejected in his home town. The Isaiah passage is an extremely apt summation of the Lucan understanding of the ministry of Jesus.

We have to declare the words and works of Jesus and how they impact upon us today. That prophetic role reminds people of the unifying vision that Jesus gave us, which begins with the good news to the poor, concern for the freedom of prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind and release for the oppressed. Could there be anything more up-to-date and relevant than that? The protest of the people regarding Jesus' message is followed by two Old Testament examples which led to an assault on Jesus. Such dramatic events remind us that our Saviour is quite clear where he stands on the subject matter this evening.

The future of Christian ecumenism is directly linked to our engagement in action and deeds together. We live better with each other when we have spoken and acted together. The Christian community must operate in different models and I draw your attention to three –

- A living centre for dialogue
- An exciting focus for creativity
- A futuristic academy for committed discipleship

John Stott has just announced his retirement from public ministry and he will be remembered for his contribution as a worldwide scholar and evangelist. I believe history will show that he was one of those evangelical Anglicans who, through the Lausanne Movement, helped to change the direction of at least some evangelical Anglicanism. He talks in his “Message of the Sermon on the Mount” of a “Christian counter-culture”. He describes the “search for a cultural alternative” as “one of the most hopeful, even exciting signs of the times.”

4. The right of each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community

During the last year, I have decided to take Wesley Mission in a new direction. In November, we raised the question of Financial Stress and its impact upon society. Our findings showed that greater numbers than ever were living beyond their means and under stress. That conversation continues, and we have found people responsive to the issue. Perhaps most disturbing of all was the fact that many people felt totally powerless to do anything about their predicament. Decisions about finance, quite rightly, need to be shared across the community.

We are being told repeatedly that the economy is doing well, but many ordinary individuals are not! – and many of the ‘not for profits’ are under pressure. In an Australia that in one sense has never been so rich, we have every reason to raise the concern that there has never been a higher level of personal debt – and we also need to find ways to call government, institutions and individuals to account, ensuring legislative change to protect the vulnerable and seek social and cultural change through education and community/corporate engagement.

In the next few months, we will be releasing findings about ‘Living with Mental Illness.’ This is not a new story, but we shall explore it in terms of the attitudes, experiences and challenges that people face. When people are exposed to mental illness, all seems to go well until it actually impacts upon the person concerned. I want to suggest this is *the* major issue that Australia has to deal with. There is no area of Wesley Mission that is untouched by the issue of mental illness. Whilst our community may be more aware than it used to be, has better knowledge and a genuine commitment to try to understand the problem, when mental illness invades our space and comfort zone, we are still reluctant to acknowledge the discrimination and social exclusion many people experience. We have a responsibility to communicate this message in order to bring about social change in our community and our places of work.

The need for a spirituality to live alongside all our social activism must be the continuing challenge. Mark Philips was a Russian language monitor for the BBC and he reflected, “The meek find much less need to push, shove and tread on their fellow human beings than others might – they are content to wait for God’s time.”

I encourage our staff to serve on government committees and a quiet word in the right ear can achieve a great deal. An organisation can help to make its views known through gentle influence much more than by sabre rattling campaigns.

5. A concern for the welfare of the whole human race

There are many people who deny that the Christian Church has any real role in modern welfare. To those people, I would suggest that if the Christian work of some of major charitable organisations,

inspired by Christian conviction, such as the St Vincent de Paul Society, Anglicare, Mission Australia, The Smith Family, the wonderful Salvation Army and our own Wesley Mission pulled out of welfare work, then Sydney would face a crisis such as it has not known in living memory.

The passion for evangelism that pumps in my veins flows from the concern that I see Jesus had for all people, irrespective of who they were. There are some expressions of Christianity which I find repugnant, not least that restrictive doctrine which decided who would be saved and who wouldn't on the basis of a philosophical or religious tenet, rather than the free grace of God. There is no barrier between God and ourselves, save that of sin and selfishness.

The universality of the gospel drives our concern for the whole of our community. UnitingCare Australia, in its "Faith Foundations" document, has quite properly declared, "No society can tolerate injustice without the inevitable loss of its peace and security."

John Wesley said, "I look upon the world as my parish." He started to preach in the open air, after being persuaded by George Whitefield. It would be quite a novelty at the time. He preached to largely illiterate and often perceived as violent Kingswood miners in Bristol. The story is told that as he preached, the black faces of the coalminers, who were not accepted in church, had white lines on their faces as tears rolled down. I have to ask the question – "Who are the equivalent of those miners today?" – and "How do we reach them?"

A friend of mine described the issue of justice for Aboriginal people as the "elephant in the room that no-one wants to talk about." The need for Aboriginal people to be empowered at a local level and the collective will of all people and governments to say sorry for past injustices will remain one of the main issues for Australian society in the short, medium and long term.

The Christian community has got to tackle life's complexities. Not everything is clear cut. We need to be able to say we belong to Jesus - but what are we going to say about the poor? We belong to Jesus – but what are we going to say about inequality? We belong to Jesus – but what are we going to say about the society we live in? There are always people who separate these matters. Once they believe in Jesus, it somehow takes them out of the reality of the world.

Wesley Mission has excelled in delivering at the initial point of need, helping people in their poverty find somewhere to sleep - in a bed!, helping people to recover from addictions, restoring families and saving the vulnerable from suicide. What we have to do is address not only these issues but the causes of poverty.

We must look holistically at the way in which our cities grow and how easily they alienate people. In our Australian context in particular we must not forget the isolation of the millions who live in our rural communities and regional centres.

Charitable and community work is much more than merely giving people something to eat. It is about enabling those who are disadvantaged to see they can play a part in society and be empowered to change their lives and those of others. This makes for a healthy and sustainable democracy.

It is also about standing beside folks in their struggle. One of the sad features of modern life is ignorance of and insensitivity towards those in need. Every time I look at the ministry of Jesus, I am moved at the way in which He responded to such people, especially those whose situation seemed hopeless. I find it impossible to imagine Jesus telling them to pull their own socks up, to stop being lazy, or that their predicament was entirely their own responsibility. Jesus called people to wholeness, newness and empowerment.

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