

Shalom!

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The Economics of Justice

IN AN ARTICLE in *Christian Century* in January 2020, entitled “Kindness, Kinship, and the Boundaries of Justice,” Amy Peterson explored the roots of the word kindness and its relationship to kinship and family inheritances. The word “kindness” is rooted in “kin,” as in family, and also in “kyndnes,” the right to a title or piece of land (an inheritance). Thinking of kindness this way led Peterson to explore how, in the United States, inherited wealth (what she calls transformative assets) benefits white people more than black people.

She cites researchers who found that “among college-educated black families, about 13 percent get an inheritance of more than \$10,000, as opposed to 41 percent of whites. And about 16 percent of those white families receive more than one such inheritance, versus two percent of black families.” The average white family inheritance is \$150,000 compared to less than \$40,00 for black family inheritances. Inheritances or transformative assets enable their recipients to pay off student loans, buy a house, move to a better neighborhood with better schools, etc. Other research has shown how discriminatory housing laws contributed to the systemic racism that continues to make wealth accumulation more difficult for blacks than for whites (see *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History About How Our Government Segregated America*, by Richard Rothstein).

Peterson concludes: “Kindness is about seeing the image of God in everyone, outsiders and insiders, and learning to love our

kin in ways that don’t oppress others. Kindness sometimes may require this redistribution of wealth as a part of justice. To have this sort of kindness requires real strength.”

Indeed. How many other examples of economic injustice require the same kindness? How do we go about implementing this kind of Jubilee thinking? Is it even possible? Given huge wealth and income gaps worldwide, and the amount of human suffering and misery they cause, don’t we have an obligation to do something, especially as Christians called by God to love our neighbors as ourselves?

This edition of *Shalom!* examines these questions and begins to offer some possible answers. Bishop Lynn Thrush opens the discussion by inviting us not to dismiss Jubilee thinking as unworkable, and other writers echo the theme. Others tell stories of what they are doing through their organizations to begin the hard work of reducing economic injustice and meeting human need.

I am well aware of how economically privileged I am, so one of the most challenging and convicting passages in the New Testament for me is this one: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3:17-18 NRSV). What about you? What can and should genuine help look like? How do we love those in economic need with truth and action?

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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Jubilee-Themed Economics

By Lynn Thrush

THIS IS A pretty clear memory: early in my pastoral ministry, about 40 years ago, I heard one of the biblically and theologically astute saints in the congregation talking about Jubilee, that every 50-year event described in Leviticus 25, when property was returned to the original owners. I remember the comment accompanied by something approaching a smirk, “Well, that didn’t work!” The clear point was that what works, obviously, is the permanent accumulation of private property, and consequently Jubilee was dismissed wholesale.

I am appealing for is not to dismiss Jubilee thinking. I am appealing for us to consider Jubilee-themed thinking and behaving

regarding economics. (I’m using the phrase “Jubilee-themed,” so we do not get fixated on an end product, and refuse to think about working toward the substance of Jubilee truth in a world that is larger than agricultural.) I am appealing to professors of economics at Christian universities across the country to invite their students to think seriously about how the themes of Jubilee might inform our thinking as individuals, families, communities, cities, and nations regarding matters of property ownership. I am appealing to younger generations to allow the themes of Jubilee to inform their thinking about how they will teach their children about matters economic. I am appealing to board members of foundations to allow Jubilee-themed thinking to inform the decision-making of the foundation.

Again, it is not a good idea to outright disregard scripture, nor is it a good idea to defer to “after Jesus returns” those things that seem to be impossible to put into practice now. For example, the “peace position” of the Brethren in Christ Church is not unworkable. One of these days the military is going to shift its remarkable logistical power to food production, because we have learned to settle disputes via the wisdom of God. (Isaiah 2:4) What is needed is some robust, courageous conversations in our universities, small groups, city governments, pastors’ conferences, blogs, and talk shows about this world working properly, like Jesus teaches us to pray. We need that same courageous thinking regarding economics.

Here is Leviticus 25:23-24, a portion of the Jubilee teaching of the entire chapter:

The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.

Think with me about not owning land permanently. Think with me about taking the mindset and identity of a foreigner and stranger. Think with me about providing for the redemption of the land.

First, in Jubilee-themed living (Isaiah 65:17-25) everyone will build houses and dwell in them; they will not build houses and others live in them. It is not unusual to bequeath land/houses to children/relatives, or perhaps causes. If we have the mindset, however, that we “own” property for a season, how could the scriptural exhortation that no one owns land permanently begin to seed our thinking so that everyone can own property?

Two, far from the ubiquitous and entrenched perspective of aspiring to be an insider in a country, Jubilee-themed living surprisingly asks us to take on the mindset and identity of a foreigner and a stranger. Even if we “own” property, our self-image is to be of someone who is renting, who is not part of the insiders of the community, not part of the ones in power. Our self-image is to be that we are new, visitors, ones not privy to advantage. How could the scriptural exhortation that we reside in the Lord’s land as foreigners and strangers begin to seed our thinking to be creative in extending welcome and advantage and opportunity to all?

Three, in Jubilee-themed living we are not so much owning “the land,” as we are redeeming the land. In Jubilee-themed living, permanent selling of land is not the norm; rather, land has value in terms of its use for persons for a period of time. Providing for the redemption of the land and clearing it by payment (as in redeeming a mortgage) involves thinking about how land and property can be made available to everyone: “Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land” (Lev. 25:24).

All of us can appreciate just how difficult and foreign the Jubilee concept appears. But could we consider Jubilee-themed economics? How can Jubilee-themed economics inform our imaginations, our community building codes, our “uncomfortability,” with persons being permanent renters? Might Jubilee-themed economics open the way for creative thinking in the face of permanent debt for individuals, for countries?



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Remember, according to Leviticus 25, we are not permanent landowners; rather, we use the land while we need it, but then, because it belongs to the Lord, it is to go back to others. Which others? All others! Remember, we are foreigners and strangers, not insiders. Remember, we are charged with redeeming the land, clearing the way for everyone to return to their own property (Lev. 25:13).

Jubilee-themed economics. Could it be? Could the world know the celebration, the jubilation, of jubilee? Yes! Let's not refuse

the entirety of Jubilee because we are certain Leviticus 25 is impossible to come to pass. Fellow foreigners, let's think together in Jubilee-themed ways. Let's talk together. Let's risk together. Truly, the land is the Lord's.

Here are some questions that I believe we must be thinking about:

1. Imagine/develop an economic system wherein land can be owned for 50 years and then. . . ? Let's not make the difficulty of answering the question stop us from talking and thinking.
2. How does taking on the identity of a for-

eigner inform our economic assumptions?

3. What are the implications of redeeming land so that it is available to the next owner, unencumbered by any obligations?

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How Is Our Plumb Line?

By Jennifer Lancaster

LOVE OF GOD and love of neighbor are binding and essential principles in our faith. This was the primary message I was hoping that folks heard during my July 2021 sermon in my local church. The assigned lectionary text for the week came from Amos 7—the third of three visions Amos had received from God regarding the status of the people in Israel. This third vision, of a plumb line showing a wall built askew, is an apt image for understanding justice in God's kingdom.

Let me first sketch what is happening in the broader biblical narrative at the time. The story of Amos takes place in the mid-eighth century (BCE). So, long gone are the days of a united kingdom under leadership of Kings David and Solomon. Rather, the kingdom is split in two: Judah in the south and the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos's story is set in the northern kingdom's city of Bethel, a city currently experiencing peace and prosperity, yet also extreme social stratification. Amos arrives from Judah and begins to prophesy against the ways Israel has been exploiting its people. In fact, both the political and religious establishments come under fire in the book.

First, politics. The king, Jeroboam II, has allowed Israelites to be sold into debt slavery, creating large gaps between rich and poor. This growing economic inequality was primarily the result of extending survival loans to peasant farmers experiencing a particularly bad season. Old Testament scholars

claim that these loans stood in opposition to Jewish social and cultural norms, thus extending the cycle of poverty as farmers slowly lost their land holdings.

Next, religion. The Northern Kingdom had built new temples and acquired dozens of new idols. Amos accuses the religious elite of hypocrisy for failing to participate in true worship. They fail to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). In short, the people of Israel had broken their status of being Yahweh's covenantal people. In the first six chapters of the book, Amos details these shortcomings and predicts the destruction of Israel. They had become complacent, a nation abounding in injustice, despite their knowledge of God's law. So, starting in chapter 7, Amos reveals a series of visions he has received from God:

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

Many commentators agree that the plumb line metaphor expresses how the Israelites are out of line with God. Moreover,

due to this misalignment, Amos proclaims that judgment is impending and walls, both literal and figurative, will crumble. One theme in the book of Amos is to show how justice, which is for all, leads to life, while injustice leads to death. Amos shows what injustice looks like by using this image of a wall, built askew, displaying its physical distortion, to represent how the people of Israel are, like the wall, out of line. But, how important is it, really, to build a straight wall? Very.

A number of years ago my husband came home from work in a frustrated mood. He designs warehouses for a living, and I asked him why he was so stressed. He responded with a long-winded explanation about the aisles being too narrow. After some additional probing, I discovered that in his current warehouse design the tolerance was too tight for a fork-lift truck to drive down the aisle and make a 90-degree turn to deliver a pallet on a rack. Tolerance is how far off you can be, plus or minus, on either side of a measurement and still stay within the maximum allowed variation. “How far off are you?” I ask. “Oh, an inch,” he replies. I giggled. To me it sounded silly that he was losing sleep over an inch! The week wore on and the design improved. In the end, the fork lift finally was able to make its turn, and I learned that tolerance is very important. Otherwise, the whole thing doesn't work. Likewise, for Amos, when a wall is out of plumb, it cannot stand for long.

So why did Amos need to receive a vision from God to communicate this truth? Because the people were utterly clueless as to their transgression. Amid the peace, prestige and seemingly devout religiosity in the northern kingdom at the time, the people had lost their interconnectedness to humanity as well as their connection to creation. It was replaced by political and religious authorities who focused on military conquest, generating wealth, and idol worship. They had lost sight of love of God and love of neighbor. Lack of righteousness and integrity had created a situation beyond repair. As Walter Brueggemann would say, the “covenantal neighborliness” that set apart the Israelite nation back in the book of Exodus had dissolved into self-interest of the elite and exploitation of the poor.

As you might imagine, Amos’s vision of a plumb line is not well received in Bethel. One could argue that it would not be well received by many Americans today, too. However, it is not a difficult leap to make to replace Israel with our own history of economic misuse. Parallels abound. Income gaps between rich and poor are at unprecedented highs, more than doubling between 1989 and 2016.¹ The dominant economic narrative continues to uphold its own power and authority despite injustice glaring it in the face.

For Amos to be the one bringing the vision of the plumb line to Israel is a difficult task. Ultimately, it threatens that very narrative and the people who uphold it. In the case of Amos (in chapter 7), it’s the priest Amaziah who must face Amos’s challenging words:

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’” And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom. Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and

a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go prophesy to my people Israel.’”

It is clear that Amos is a threat to Amaziah—not just to him personally as priest but to everything that connects Amaziah, the priesthood, organized religion, and the king. This is obvious because as soon as he can, Amaziah reports to Jeroboam the treasonous words of the prophet. Commentator Douglas King tells us that when he, Amaziah, feels threatened by Amos’s words, he turns to the king, quickly and fully relying on the power structure that has served him so well.² I wonder how we rely on similar structures and what consequences might exist by doing so. Are our actions, our economic choices, essentially perpetuating the cycle of inequality?

As scornful as Amaziah is in his verbal assault on Amos, Amos’s response is firmly grounded in his adherence to God’s law and his commitment to covenant. His authority to prophesy comes directly from God. The prophetic message he sets out to deliver rests wholly in where he places its authority. King’s commentary continues, saying “when we accept human systems as possessors of ultimate authority, we are living a lie.”³ Amos brought to light Amaziah’s lie.

In the end, the simple image of a plumb line against a crooked wall sends a powerful message to a crumbling nation. Crippled by the negative consequences of its economic success and misaligned by its religious idolatry, Amos attempts to re-center the people of Israel to right relationship with one another and with Yahweh.

How can we, today, work to build community—in our homes, churches, state, and nation in such a way that we honor Yahweh’s desire for us to live as his covenantal people? Perhaps we can read this story of the plumb line knowing that it is a critical tool, one that can both critique and affirm our relationship with God and others. Of us it demands righteous acts.

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where they attend the Lancaster Brethren in Christ Church. This article is adapted from a sermon she preached there this summer.

Notes:

¹Katherine Schaeffer, “Six facts about economic inequality in the U.S. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/6-facts-about-economic-inequality-in-the-u-s/>.

²Douglas King, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 221.

³King, 223,

“Yahweh will be found, first and foremost, with those who are oppressed, enslaved, and suffering—at the bottom of society—rather than with the powerful and mighty (such as Pharaoh). . . . We have too often been conformed to the Pharaonic empire and its ways.”

(Missional Economics, by Michael Barram).

“The Bible seeks to transform our moral imaginations so that we will reason economically from the perspective of abundance and gratitude as opposed to scarcity and fear.”

(Missional Economics, by Michael Barram).

Increasing Opportunity for Nigerian Women and Youth

By Mike Strathdee

NIGERIA IS ONE is one of the larger and wealthier nations in Africa. But economic opportunity is varied and unevenly distributed. Average income of \$416US per month is more than a dozen times higher than what many rural farm families subsist on.

Just under half of Nigeria's 201 million citizens live in rural areas. The poverty rate (families earning less than \$1US a day) among that group is 47.3 percent. Northern regions of the country have higher unemployment, greater economic and gender inequality and outbreaks of violent conflict.

MEDA's youth entrepreneurship and women's empowerment in northern Nigeria (WAY) project aims to increase the contribution by entrepreneurs and small-scale businesses, particularly those run by women and youth, to Nigeria's economic growth. Lack of access to infrastructure, mobility and finance have been barriers to women's participation in business.

The five-year effort, funded by Global Affairs Canada and contributions from individual MEDA supporters, targets businesses in Bauchi State's processing sector and food industry. It focuses specifically on three main value chains: rice, peanuts and soybeans.

The project aims to improve business performance, enhance the business environment for women and youth, and strengthen community and family support to decrease the risk of early and forced girl child marriage.

Bauchi State is the gateway of the Boko Haram insurgency. Boko Haram, often translated to mean "Western education is forbidden," began an armed rebellion against Nigeria's government in 2009.

Many women whose husbands have been killed in the conflict fled to Bauchi, which had a major impact on the region's economy, said Grace Fosen, MEDA's country director for the Nigeria Way project.

The project has surpassed its target of reaching 16,000 women and youth entrepre-

neurs working in the soybean, rice and peanut agriculture value chains, with a year remaining. By this spring, the WAY program had worked with over 17,000 entrepreneurs. On a related goal of working with 523



Adama and her spouse Mallam Jibrin wash paddy rice to prepare it for parboiling.

women sales agents, the project has engaged 498 to date.

Savings and loan groups—people who meet regularly to pool savings, make loans and learn new skills to overcome issues that limit them from having or growing a business—have worked well as an entry point, says Grace Fosen, MEDA's country director for the Nigeria Way project. "That gave these women the ability to save a little . . . to give themselves loans."

The groups help provide financing for people who have found it difficult to engage with financial institutions, empowering them to put more money into their businesses. Women in 200 groups across seven different areas have accumulated 121 million Nigerian Naira (\$314,600 US).

Introducing new technology to improve processing techniques and stimulating business innovation are important elements of the project. Assistance to purchase rice parboiling equipment and other technologies have helped women enjoy greater success in the market due to the higher quality of their product. Climate smart technology has also saved both time and drudgery.

A traditional parboiling technique took a week to process one bag of rice and resulted in substandard quality. A system that in-

volves steaming the rice instead of boiling it processes two bags in two hours, with improved quality and reduced consumption of water and oil.

Improved cooking systems are also being introduced through the project. An estimated 95,000 Nigerian women die annually due to indoor gas pollution. Use of locally produced briquettes that do not smoke inside the house produce a more sustainable fuel source.

Increased business success and higher family incomes have led to improved communication and household decision making, with husbands assisting with household chores and helping their wives market their production.

Mike Strathdee is publications editor in the marketing and communication department at MEDA. This article is reprinted by permission from the July/August 2021 edition of The Marketplace.

What is MEDA?

For nearly 70 years, MEDA (formerly Mennonite Economic Development Association) has been creating business solutions to poverty, guided by the vision that all people may unleash their God-given potential to earn a livelihood, provide for families and enrich communities. Decent work delivers a fair income, security, prospects for personal development, freedom to express concerns, and equality of opportunity for women and men. Using the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as our guide, MEDA is working to eliminate poverty and advance equality by aligning our goals with six of the SDGs: no poverty, zero hunger, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, climate action, and partnerships for the goals. More information about where MEDA works is at www.meda.org/where-we-work/.

Do Good. Make Money. Empower Others.

By Luke Embree

THERE IS AN abundance of grace and goodness in our world. Any Christian discussion of economic justice must begin from this point, because if it was not for the abundance of grace and goodness in our world, established through the ongoing involvement of a compassionate God, we would have no basis from which to begin our critique of economic injustice. God's grace and goodness are distributed equally and are accessible to all in infinite abundance.

There is also an abundance of wealth in our world. However, unlike God's grace, the world's wealth is not distributed equally or equitably, which is to say according to what each person needs or deserves. Analysis of Forbes's most recent data on the wealth of the 719 billionaires in the US reveals that their collective wealth has increased 55 percent since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. These 719 individuals now collectively hold more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of the American people.¹ Together, 719 individuals hold more wealth than roughly 165 million people. Such a disparity is worse than obscene; it's sinful.

I've come to the realistic if somewhat depressing conclusion that there's really nothing I can do about that. I don't believe God is calling me to do something for or against the 719 US billionaires and I realistically can't do much for the 165 million people who deserve a greater slice of the economic pie. But I can do something for Lydia and Mary, and I hope one day I can do something for people like Ericka.

As part of our ministry, some friends and I have recently developed a business with a very simple set of values: Do Good. Make Money. Empower Others. With a fourth imperative, it becomes our mission statement: Do Good. Make Money. Empower Others. Repeat. I'll explain.

Having planted a church, I've come into contact with many wonderful people who are often overlooked or effectively pushed toward the margins, like Lydia. Lydia is a Congolese refugee with an active family and a radiant smile. In addition to working and

raising her family, she's studying to obtain her GED. People like Lydia, unfamiliar with American culture and bearing an unfamiliar accent, are often relegated to minimum wage jobs. Worse still, they're sometimes exploited.

One of the objectives of our business is to provide livable wages (currently in the range of \$15/hour) for people like Lydia. Our business is able to employ people to serve the needs of offices and financial institutions like banks, thus creating a safe environment for them to learn, grow, and make a living. Even better, we are able to partner with other organizations whose mission is to do the same, like the one led by Mary.

Mary is the director of Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM), a nonprofit that cares for and equips refugees coming to America. Mary's team provides numerous services, including housing assistance, language classes, and legal aid. They also partner with small businesses to help their clients obtain good jobs. We're grateful to be able to partner with KRM and, over the coming months and years, we look forward to growing our relationship with the ones they serve.

As the company grows, we intend to delegate much of its operations to our employees and partners. Through the creation of systems and processes, we are able to train, empower, and delegate responsibilities to others, thus creating a company that can be managed on the basis of 15-20 hours a week. This frees people like me to serve the Lord through pastoral ministry while receiving a semi-passive income. I want to replicate this model as a solution to financing church plants and other ministries, empowering people who want to do good in their city, like Ericka.

Ericka is a Brethren in Christ church planter and pastor. She's an extremely capable young woman and would be successful at anything she put her mind to. What is she putting her mind to doing? Ericka moved from her home in Arizona to Allentown, PA to plant a church and care for her neighbors, many of whom are, in fact, the ones our so-

ciety esteems the least.

We all know that no one gets into church planting to make money. In truth, the types of people who plant churches typically accept that they will make far less money, work far more hours, and bear far more burden, worry, and frustration than the average occupation. They do it because they love Jesus and they love people. Period.

In my humble opinion, these are the people we should be showering with finances, precisely because they are freely dispensing God's goodness and grace in our world with little regard for themselves. At the very least, we should provide them with 401ks, health insurance, and livable salaries. And it's not

"[F]rom a divine perspective, economically depressed and marginalized lives matter. This does not deny the fact that all lives matter. God loves everyone, and all lives do matter. Nevertheless, those who suffer economically at the hands of individuals and systems of power must, from God's perspective, be acknowledged, valued, vindicated, supported, and restored."

(*Missional Economics*, by Michael Barram).

just church planters. There are myriad ways people like Ericka love and serve their communities full time, often earning near or below poverty compensation. Considering the amount of wealth collectively held by the people of God, this too is sinful.

I hope that the business we have started may serve to aid, support, and empower others in their pursuit of God's "kingdom on earth as in heaven." We hope it might become a productive model that can be repli-

cated, helping many more Lydias, Marys, and Erickas in our world. We hope that it may advance the broader conversation of realizing economic justice for all by establishing stable provision for those who devote themselves to doing good in their communities. Through the empowerment of employees like Lydia and partnerships with leaders like Mary, we hope to create semi-passive sources

of income for families like Ericka's. It is certainly not the solution to wealth disparity in our world, but it is an active participation in the good that is given to us by God. In its own small way, it is generating and distributing wealth in exactly the right places.

Note:

¹Chuck Collins, "Updates: Billionaire Profits, U.S.

Job Losses, and Pandemic Profiteers," Inequality.Org., Institute for Policy Studies, July 14, 2021, <https://inequality.org/great-divide/updates-billionaire-pandemic/>.

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A Journey of Bold Listening

By Anna Vogt

A WISE MENTOR once told me that advocacy means listening boldly. To advocate means building relationships and paying attention to stories and what they tell us about the connections and responsibilities we share with one another. And, over the years, I've found advocacy to be a life-giving spiritual discipline. It's rooted in the biblical stories of people like Esther. It's based on choosing to believe in the possibility of change, on listening out of a place of connection and on working together.

I spent many of my growing up years in the beautiful Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in territory in Dawson City, Yukon. It's a place of complexity and history, of small towns and close relationships, of settler and Indigenous cultures, of gold mining and breathtaking landscapes. It's a place where I first started thinking about the histories that we share as I learned more about my own Russian Mennonite family's journey and how to be a good guest on northern land.

After university, where I had studied grassroots nonviolent movements, joining MCC's two-year Seed program for young adults felt like a natural step. The program's focus on living and walking alongside churches engaging in peacebuilding meant that I had the opportunity to live and work in Mampuján, Colombia, from 2011-2013.

Members of this Afro-Colombian community are among the nearly seven million people who have been displaced inside Colombia by decades of armed conflict. Although very different from the Yukon, it is also a place of complexity, of conflict, of close relationships, of colonization, of harm and of healing.

Supported by MCC partner Sembradopaz, whose Spanish name means planting peace, the women of the community en-

ers, also started telling another story—of community resilience and hope, of forgiveness and breaking cycles of violence, of working for reparations and dignity through advocacy.

As I attended meetings and advocacy events alongside community leaders like Juana Alicia Ruíz Hernández, I saw how hope, prophetically linked to action, grew out of their belief in a God of restoration and love who calls people to engage together in nonviolence. Near the end of my time in Mampuján, I had the great joy of watching some community members receive their first reparations payments from the government. I was inspired by the change that could take place when people gathered to share their stories and then act together.

For churches across Colombia, including in Mampuján, this work of building peace and healing was often messy and complicated. Not everyone agreed with each other. The very real risk of retaliation from armed groups was always present. However, the goal of shalom—of peace with justice, grounded in theology—brought people together in polarized contexts in a way that political ideologies could not.

After my time in the Seed program, I moved to Bogotá, Colombia's capital, where I continued to serve with MCC. During my time there, the Colombian government and the largest armed group, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC; Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), engaged in peace dialogues. During a time of debate nationwide, many Colombian churches and MCC part-



In 2010, Mampuján community leader Juana Alicia Ruíz Hernández displays a partially completed 10-year historic quilt project in Colombia celebrating the Mampuján community's past before they were displaced by a paramilitary group in 2000. The quilt recreates the layout of Mampuján Viejo. (MCC photo/Silas Crews)

gaged in trauma healing through quilting their stories. As they sewed, they shared what had happened to them over 500 years of history. They stitched their ancestors being brought as slaves to Colombia, their displacement by armed groups and their dreams of a future free of violence.

They, along with other community lead-



ners brought that same message of peace for everyone to their congregations. Some, like MCC partner Justapaz, whose name combines the Spanish words for justice and peace, engaged in direct advocacy to the negotiating parties.

The story of Esther was often used as a reference point. In times such as these, what is the role of the church? Just as Esther was uniquely positioned to speak to the king, how was the church called to respond to contexts of violence and uncertainty?

This public commitment to peace is not just for times of celebration, or when efforts seem likely to bear fruit. In 2016, when the government and the FARC were ready to sign a peace agreement, the last step was the referendum for Colombians to vote on the agreement. Instead of the resounding yes vote we expected, many of those who had not experienced conflict, including many in churches in urban areas, voted no. The peace agreement was in jeopardy. The peace churches' public witness was essential.

After the vote, faith leaders, including Anabaptists, gathered in the central plaza of Bogotá, publicly recommitting to the work of peace. We celebrated communion, breaking bread together. It was a moment of confession and renewal, based on the relationships we shared with those directly

impacted by violence. Years of listening were transformed into a bold public witness.

The opportunity to work with the global church, and to witness these powerful examples of love in action through advocacy, has shaped my own understanding of faith and of my faith calling. This work isn't easy. It can be deeply painful to be confronted with situations of violence and injustice and asked to examine my own responsibility. Yet we are not alone.

As I stood with my colleagues from Justapaz, among many others, in the square in Bogotá, it was another chance to experience the power of being willing to sit with discomfort and grief and of the public witness of sharing bread with one another. In these spaces of walking together and sharing joys and sorrows, I found a sense of hope.

Within many Christian traditions, there is a long history of paying attention to the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit. When I talk with community leaders like Juana Alicia or am in planning meetings, I often sense that I am hearing that still, small voice.

Here in Ottawa, a world away from the Yukon and from Colombia, I have a tapestry from Mampuján hanging in my office. When I look at it, I am reminded that I am sewn into the community story, and that the community and my time in Latin America also

are stitched deeply into my own story.

I continue to reflect on the lessons of Esther. When are we asked to be Esther and when are we called to examine if we are the ones who are being invited to listen and respond to the voices of the Esthers in our own contexts? What does bold listening look like here?

In our advocacy work, in Canada and the U.S., we build bridges between government decision makers and MCC partners. We strive to encourage government policies that recognize the connections that we share with one another, that uphold dignity and peace and that undo harm.

Together, we continue to imagine different futures of repair and restoration. As we do this work, my own faith continues to be shaped and my understandings of justice, mercy and love are renewed and re-imagined. Daily, I am privileged to witness and learn from the power of faith communities around the world and in Canada, as we gather to share stories, listen deeply and take the next step boldly, based on the relationships we share with one another.

Anna Vogt is director of MCC Canada's Peace and Justice Office in Ottawa, ON. She served with MCC and was based in Colombia from 2011 to 2018. Mennonite Central Committee US article, used with

The Sound of God's Justice

By Zach Spidel

WE INVOKE THE term “justice” so frequently today, and are so deeply divided about it, that I believe it's important to start this column by laying out my understanding of the biblical significance of that word. Justice, in the Hebrew of the Old Testament (*sedaqa/mispat*), does not have the same narrowly judicial connotations that the people of the English-speaking world have inherited from the Latin cognate term (*iustitia*) which lies behind our own verbiage. Justice, beginning in the Old Testament and very much continuing into the New, is not about people receiving their “just rewards” according to some prior set of standards or stipulations. Rather, justice is doing what is needed to establish or restore wholesome and holy rela-

tionship between people under God. Very often what is just—what is needed to restore right relationship—turns out to be the showing of mercy, the offering of forgiveness, and the giving of what has not been earned but what is, nevertheless, needed by another.

One of the many places where this biblical vision of justice is revealed in all its startling beauty is Isaiah 30. The chapter begins with a wail: “Oh, rebellious children, says the Lord, who carry out a plan, but not mine; who make an alliance, but against my will, adding sin to sin. . . .” For 17 verses, the prophet proclaims to the people the terrible depths of their own depravity. In one of the most striking images of the passage, God through Isaiah says, “this iniquity shall be-



come for you like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse, whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant. . . .” The prophecy goes on to emphasize the people's stubborn commitment to their sin despite the wall bulging above their heads under the weight of all that wickedness. Just as this terrible crescendo appears to reach its climax—just as we with our fallen notions of what is just and fair expect God to bring down the proverbial hammer—we hear this: “There-

fore, the LORD waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice (mispat); blessed are all those who wait for him.”

That initial “therefore” is a real shocker, isn’t it? Not in spite of the people’s commitment to rebellion, but because of it, or, at least, in view of it, God’s response is to wait them out. He is determined to show them a mercy they keep rebuffing. Thank God that his determination is always greater than our own! Notice, as well, that for Isaiah there is no tension between this determination to show mercy and the idea that God is just. In fact, Isaiah says it is because God is just that he is determined to show mercy. If justice is simply a commitment to restore shalom—to re-establish whole and wholesome webs of relationship—then this makes all the sense in the world. For mercy restores where retribution (“you get what you deserve/earn”) leads so often to small-minded, small-hearted resentments and the further breakdown of community.

Biblical passages along these lines could be multiplied many times over. For instance, Psalm 116, in a typical instance of Hebrew parallelism, praises God in this way: “Gracious is the LORD, and just; yes, our God is compassionate!” But let’s move on to a text that uses economic imagery to teach spiritual truths that will, in return, transform our economic lives if fully embraced.

The parable of the laborers in the vine-

yard (Matthew 20:1-16) is a profound and profoundly important text for our topic. Jesus teaches that God does not reward us in a measure strictly commensurate with what we have, by some tabulation, “earned.” Rather, he gives to us each what we need each day, even if some of us have served much more or less than others. God’s generosity offends some who do not feel grateful for the pay they were promised but angry that others who did less than them have received the same reward. Despite their anger, the God-figure in Jesus’s parable is resolute in his decision to pay out to each worker, however much they worked, enough for them to eat that day. This is *sedaqa* in action. This is what God considers just, even if it goes against our preferred notions.

If this is how God is with spiritual treasures, how much quicker should we be to imitate our heavenly Father in this practice with mere earthly goods? What if Christian business people did not pay their workers the lowest wage the market will bear, but the highest amount they could possibly afford? And what if they paid not according to the tabulations of the world, which value the consultant’s expertise at \$150 dollars an hour and the janitor’s at \$9.50, but according to their worth of each person before God? What would that mean and what would that look like? How could it be done? Are we willing to honestly ask such questions? To earnestly implement whatever frail and par-

tial answers we come to?

What if, anytime you hired a contractor to work on your home or were served by a waiter, you determined to tip them extravagantly? What if your tip was more extravagant the more you suspected the person working for you might have little economic cushion?. What if that was your sole concern in tabulating tips, rather than any attempt to reward better service with more money? What if you left a very rude waiter a very large tip because they were rude and, therefore, clearly not having a very good day?

What if, when you bought a house, you chose to live in one whose size, features, and neighborhood were well below your means so that you could give more generously to others? What if even that question, along with all these others, was just the beginning of a Christian rethinking of economics? I have been asking myself these questions for the last 10 years at least. They remain exciting to me because I believe they are driven, as if by a drumbeat, by the justice of God. The sound of the song of God’s justice is enough, now even as it was in the days of the psalmists and prophets, to make a person want to dance for joy.

Zach Spidel is pastor of The Shepherd’s Table, Dayton, OH.

Breaking from Cultural Expectations

By Rand Williamson

AT ITS CORE, the question of what role the Church should play in addressing social inequality is part of a larger question about how and if the Church should approach politics generally. Questions about distribution and redistribution of resources, about political economy, cut to the foundation of political institutions and the ideologies that they promote as “truth,” and they can make you enemies pretty quickly. It makes sense then that many in the Beloved Community might find these questions distasteful and want to avoid them all together in favor of concerns considered more tradi-

tionally spiritual.

In this article, I want to argue that this drive away from politics is ill-advised and essentially amounts to a retreat from our responsibilities as members of the Beloved Community. We currently live in a country where only five percent of the population controls around 60 percent of all the wealth, where billionaires travel to space while millions of Americans are facing the very real prospect of eviction and living on the streets. Basically, we live in a society sick with social inequality, and this sickness affects the Church directly because it’s made up of peo-

ple who suffer the symptoms of this sickness. It is time to start asking some hard questions about what our role in this sickness is, because we will play one for good or for ill.

When looking back at our tradition as members of the Beloved Community of God, we see that there has always been a concern with material inequality and a realization that justice on the material dimension is connected to spiritual health. One example of this, which has recently become popular due to Christian political projects such as the Poor People’s Campaign, is the practice of Jubilee outlined in the book of Leviticus. Dur-

ing the year of Jubilee, slaves are freed and those who have fallen on hard times are restored to their ancestral properties. It serves as a kind of reset that allows for continued community cohesion. This cohesion is compromised by inequality and the development of materially defined classes in society. It is an acknowledgement that, in reality, God owns everything and a way to “proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” This was an act designed to promote profound freedom not based on superficial things like a variety of consumer choices or a certain allotment of leisure time but on the absence of exploitation and coercion.

Later on, in the book of Acts, we see that the Beloved Community has advanced these ideas beyond even the edicts laid down in Leviticus. Of our community, it is said “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” This style of life makes Jubilee obsolete. Early Church leaders gave their harshest criticisms to those who benefited from social inequality. The epistle of James is noteworthy on this topic when it says “Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.” Especially relevant to our current situation is James’s realization that social inequality is the result of theft and fraud. He saw the existence of inequality, which caused members of his community to suffer, as an offense to God himself.

Up to this point, I have been highlighting why we should care enough to act on this issue and shining light on the fact that the prophetic tradition of the Beloved Community has always been engaged in the fight against social inequality right from its inception. Where does this leave us today? How do we carry on this tradition of creating space for transformation in a world that seems more locked down than ever?

One thing we must realize is that the kind of inequality that exists in the US is a recipe for unrest, and it will result in an increasing number of crises and political up-

heavals. On our current trajectory, we will have to learn to navigate an increasingly tumultuous landscape as a community while holding onto the integrity of the way of Jesus Christ. One figure who might help us navigate this narrow and tricky path is the late Oscar Romero who, during his time as a Church leader, faced tremendous political repression in his native country of El Salvador. In his letter, “The Church and Popular Political Organizations,”¹ he lays out some wisdom that could benefit our search for a middle way in the US today.

Brother Romero, early in his letter, affirms the Church’s role in the political struggles of the time: “It is, however, our honest intention to dispel the inertia of the many Salvadorans who are indifferent to the suffering in our land. . . .” He compels us to think about how we would answer the question God put to Cain in Genesis 4:10: “What have you done? Listen to the sound of your brother’s blood crying out to me from the ground.” To Romero, the Church as a community which inherently wields power had a key role to play in defending the dignity of those who wished to organize politically. Romero also cautions us saying that “Christians with a political vocation should strive to achieve a synthesis between their Christian faith and their political activity, but without identifying them. Faith ought to inspire political action but not be mistaken for it.”

In the end, we must have faith that God will reveal our path forward, and when it is revealed, we must summon up the courage to break from the conformist expectations of our culture and follow that path. In the past, our Beloved Community was able to more fully live out the ideals of equality, and taking more seriously how we can replicate the communities described in Acts might be a good step forward. While this is a more internal approach, it is not apolitical. In fact, few things are as threatening to a system as sincerely and openly modeling alternatives to it. Building these communities, and expanding them, would become controversial if we could do it successfully. We cannot, however, allow this to deter us. Our Father’s work is the work of transformation on every level from the singular to the global, and we need to be about our Father’s work.

Rand Williamson is a long-time Philadelphia resident and a member of Circle of Hope’s South Broad Street congregation. Over the last year and a half, he has been leading the Circle of Peacemakers compassion team there and is active in other grassroots organizations such as Reclaim Philadelphia. He currently works in neuroscience research and is preparing to do a PsyD in neuropsychology. Check out his other writing at <https://peacemaker.design.blog/> or email him at randw87@gmail.com.

Note:

¹The Church and Popular Political Organizations: Third Pastoral Letter of Archbishop Romero,” Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1978, <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/thirdpastoralletter.pdf>. Accessed August 20, 2021.

“The North American church has tended to operate from the perspective of cultural, economic, and political privilege, which has resulted, all too often, in a cozy relationship with the priorities, forces, and structures that reflect worldly power and wealth more than the kind of communal economy of generosity and abundance that Jesus seems to be advocating in this passage” [the rich young ruler, Mark 10:17-31].

(Missional Economics, by Michael Barram).

“Productivity is one of the most deeply engrained values and priorities in North American culture, and, in my experience, that is often no less true in churches.”

(Missional Economics, by Michael Barram).

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to help each other within the abundance supplied to the whole nation to help each individual within the nation. Those with more should help those in need and this is more than a condescending noblesse oblige. It is a matter of God's calling for a truly communal and relational life, including economically.

Barram rightly sees ancient Israel as a covenant community with known expectations between God and his chosen people. But he also sees the church as a covenant community. We too are "to 'seek justice' in a covenantal context [fostering] a holistic community of interdependent relationships in which all, including the most vulnerable, flourish consistently." Barram asserts that God's economic concerns are consistent throughout the old and new covenants.

Like the Hebrew scriptures, the New Testament is full of economic concerns. Jesus reads the famous Isaiah passage in the Nazareth synagogue proclaiming "good news to the poor." We see the effect of wealth on the rich young ruler. We see Zacchaeus's salvation translating into economic restoration and justice for those he cheated. We know we are to "consider the lilies," that we can't "serve two masters," that we are to "store up treasure in heaven" not on earth. In Acts we see the covenantal community of the church feeding the widows and sharing re-

sources with those in need. We see sister churches taking up collections to help the church in Jerusalem and other acts based on God's abundance and not a fear of scarcity. Reading the New Testament with a purposeful eye towards economic realities and teachings yields lessons that should inform our own economic understanding and practices.

The call to follow God is a call on the totality of our lives. Understanding and practicing a God-centered approach to our economic lives is not tangential, but fully incorporated in how we live and become missional in our witness to the world. In God's economics, it is not only a matter of our individual choices but also the way the covenantal community, the church, works within God's "divine abundance" and rejects "the idolatries of traditional human economic reasoning." We need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds and *Missional Economics* is a well-reasoned theological work that is accessible to readers both familiar and new to the topic. May we be open to the Spirit leading us into truth as we read, study, and practice the Word together.

Lois Saylor attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and serves on the Shalom! editorial committee.

Editor's Notes

Subscription renewals and contributions:

Many of you have responded to the 2021 subscription renewal letter. Thank you so much. If you haven't contributed yet, you can do so now. The annual subscription rate is \$20, and we welcome additional contributions. Checks should be payable to Brethren in Christ US and sent to the editor (address on page 2), or renew online at bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/.

Final topic for 2021 and looking ahead:

If all goes well, the fall edition will feature stories from the global Brethren in Christ Church. Please contact the editor if you know Brethren in Christ people in other countries who might have a story to share about how their church is working with the ten core values, especially serving compassionately and pursuing peace. In the meantime, I welcome your ideas for topics and writers for 2022.

Wealth and Income Inequality

From *Inequality.org*

Wealth

- The world's richest one percent, those with more than \$1 million, own 43.4 percent of the world's wealth. Adults with less than \$10,000 in wealth make up 53.6 percent of the world's population but hold just 1.4 percent of global wealth. Individuals owning over \$100,000 in assets make up 12.4 percent of the global population but own 83.9 percent of global wealth.
- The share of national income going to the richest one percent has increased rapidly in North America (United States and Canada), China, India, and Russia

and more moderately in Europe.

- The combined wealth of all US billionaires increased by 59.8 percent between March 18, 2020 and July 9, 2021, from approximately \$2.947 trillion to \$4.711 trillion. Of the more than 700 US billionaires, the richest five saw a 113 percent increase in their combined wealth during this period.

Income

- America's top 10 percent average more than nine times as much income as the bottom 90 percent. Americans in the top 1 percent average over 39 times more income than the bottom 90 per-

cent. Americans in the top 0.1 percent take in over 196 times the income of the bottom 90 percent.

- As of the second quarter of 2021, the median white worker made 26 percent more than the typical black worker and around 30 percent more than the median Latino worker.
- The median white family has 41 times more wealth than the median black family and 22 times more wealth than the median Latino family.

Inequality.org is a project of the Institute for Policy Studies and aims to provide information and insights for readers ranging from educators and journalists to activists and policy makers. The statistics here come from the "Facts" section of the website where the original sources are cited in full.

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BOOK REVIEW

Lessons in Abundance, Scarcity, and the Covenantal Community

By Lois Saylor

Be not conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds (Romans 12:2).

AS BELIEVERS WE may very well embrace the scriptural verses of transformation. We long to disengage from worldly patterns and to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus. But what if the patterns of the world are so deeply ingrained in us that we do not see them as something needing change, but rather perceive them as the norm, the natural order of things, or as basic laws that govern the world? This may be exactly the position we are in when it comes to understanding how we live in the world economically. What economic presuppositions or principles are we holding that conform to the patterns of the world? Are we rendering more unto Caesar than we should?

Missional Economics is the issue and name of a book by Michael Barram, a professor of theology and religious studies at Saint Mary's College of California. The subtitle, *Biblical Justice and Christian Formation*, identifies his focus on the economic justice called for in both Old and New Testaments and how we

should be transformed or formed by scripture. He reviews the scriptures which are replete with calls to live with economic integrity, justice, and generosity.

Barram proposes that our economic lives are part of our mission from God to the world, but we need biblical and spiritual formation to do economics rightly and justly. To learn from scripture, he looks at the biblical narratives, the law, the prophets, and the New Testament. Two basic narratives he discusses are the Garden of Eden and the Exodus which both helped to form Jewish thought. God's economy in Eden was "abundance." Everything humans needed was provided. Then the fall brings about a change in the world's economy summed up in the word "scarcity." Now humans must work the ground with thorns and trouble. We work, think, and plan out of a mindset and fear of scarcity in which we fight to get our piece of the pie (or more) and then hoard it.

The second narrative is the Exodus story of God delivering the people from slavery and oppression. Over and over Israel is told not to oppress people because they know the hardships of oppression. Instead, just as God

delivered them, Israel is to take on the role of liberator, freeing the oppressed and helping those on the margins of society—or in biblical terms, the widows, orphans, and sojourners.

Next, the law codified God's desire for just economic treatment between people with rules on honest weights and scales, not moving boundary stones, redeemer guardians, and the wealthy landowners leaving behind portions of their crops for the poor to glean. These last two are profoundly illustrated in the story of Ruth and Boaz. Deuteronomy and Leviticus are full of rules of economic principles including lending practices and the year of Jubilee, and we can see God's heart for economic justice within them.

The prophets too speak to God's interest in missional economics as they rail and warn against Israel's treatment of the poor but still offer blessings should Israel repent of cheating and abusing those who are marginalized and without the resources to help themselves. God works on the principle of abundance and calls on the covenant community

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