

NEHEMIAH – OUR MODEL FOR ORGANIZING CONGREGATIONS FOR JUSTICE

Micah 6:8 provides a clear list of requirements for God’s people: to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. A similar list is found in the Christian gospel of Matthew 23: 23, where Jesus declares the “weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness.” Comparing the activities of our congregations to these requirements often reveal some important insights.

Faithfulness ministry includes those things that encourage our members to be faithful to God such as worship, studies, prayer, etc. Upon reflection, most clergy feel as though they are doing a pretty good job in this area. Our congregations gather at least 52 times a year for worship and provide many other opportunities for prayer and study.

Mercy ministries include those ways in which we help individuals with immediate needs in our community. Most clergy feel we are doing a fair job of fulfilling God’s mercy requirement through programs like tutoring, food pantries, counseling, etc.

Justice ministry addresses the systems, not the victims in our community. It is not the same as mercy ministries and the distinction is important. For example, a mercy response to homelessness involves food programs and shelters. A justice response takes action to address the underlying questions: Why are there so many homeless people in our community? Why are many families unable to afford a decent place to live? Why are so many people with mental health problems ending up on the streets? Both mercy and justice are required by God, but they are very different. Mercy helps individuals, justice holds systems accountable. When this distinction is understood, the failure to do justice appears obvious.

There is a good reason for this: none of our congregations on our own have enough power to do it successfully. In our communities power comes from two sources: organized people and organized money. Our congregations don’t have the same money that major economic and political systems possess. So we must organize large numbers of people if we wish to be successful in doing justice.

The fifth chapter of Nehemiah is a great example of God’s people organizing in large numbers to do justice. Nehemiah, Cupbearer to the King of Persia, goes to Jerusalem to restore its identity by rebuilding the wall around the city. During construction, there is an outcry among the people. There has been a drought in the land and the people of Jerusalem were forced to take out loans to buy food and pay taxes. The drought continued and the moneylenders took everything: their fields, vineyards, orchards, and even forced people to sell their children into slavery to repay their debts. We read in verse six that Nehemiah was angry when he heard their cries and stopped to think about what to do. Nehemiah had a choice. He could choose to do mercy ministry by opening a food pantry or credit counseling program. Or he could do justice

by changing the lending system. Scripture tells us he chose the latter. But even though he possessed status as the Cup Bearer to the King of Persia, Nehemiah didn't have enough power to do it alone. Verse seven of chapter five tells us, he organized a "Great Assembly" of people and brought forth the money lenders to be held accountable. During this assembly, the money lenders agreed to restore everything they had taken from the people, and they followed-through on their promises