

Justice at Work at Work

JUSTICE! It seems to me that we think of justice in big letters and in big cases—the big news of the day, the sensational trials of the moment. Or perhaps it is in Judge Judy's or Judge Brown's TV courtrooms—the ongoing drama of ordinary people in conflict with others in their lives.

However, as a former union officer and retired head of personnel for two school districts, it seems to me to be a much more ordinary part of daily work life. It is about giving and receiving what is due to our fellow workers and our employers, about respecting rights—those derived from being a human being and those derived from contracts. It is about relationships that are equitable and harmonious.

As I see it, as workers—employed or volunteer, paid or not paid, bosses/supervisors or frontline workers—we are involved in two settings where the dynamic of justice is needed, our workplace and our community.

The expectations that workplace justice has for the employer seem to center on three things: fair wages, meaningful work, and a fair decision making process for when there is conflict between management and labor. For the employee they seem to center on fair work or craftsmanship, openness to the meaningfulness of the work, and participation in a fair decision making process.

The expectations that justice has for the community might be called social justice. That is the development and improvement of the common good, helping the community be a more equitable and harmonious place in which to live, work, and do business. Here if an employer could not afford to pay a fair wage because to do so would make him\her uncompetitive, the employer could seek allies and work within the industry to bring all companies' wages to the level of a fair wage. If local workers are being undercut by lower labor and environmental costs associated with other countries, employers can work with their associations and the government to require equitable labor and environmental rules be followed by all producers of products sold locally.

Employees have a social justice responsibility, also. One aspect is within the companies for which they work. If there are injustices in wages, work, or decision making, they are being just when they form alliances or unions, come together, and seek to work out the problems with their employers. They participate in the decision making process, seeking to make it as fair as possible and then accepting the decisions that result. In this way they work for social justice within their workplace community.

In the broader community, the practice of justice calls employees to improve the common good, too. I remember as a teacher of social studies how impressed I was that US union leaders sought to help workers in other countries to organize and improve their own situations. Any improvement in working conditions in those other countries ultimately helped improve the working conditions in this country. In the same way, workers joining with other workers in a community can, and do, improve the community for the good of all.

Seeking to practice justice in our workplaces seems to require us to be open to understanding the opinions and needs of all in our workplaces and our communities and to be collaborative in addressing those opinions and needs.

JUSTICE — A Faith Based Value at Work

- 1.** What does applying the faith-based value of justice in your workplace mean to you? What do you think it would mean to those with whom you work? How does its meaning change for your different workplaces, for example, home or where you volunteer?
- 2.** Why is it important to gain an understanding of justice in the workplace and how to apply that understanding?
- 3.** How do/could you apply the concept of justice in your workplace(s)?
- 4.** What would happen in your workplace if you took and actively applied the value of faith-based justice in your workplace(s)? How would the workplace sound different? Look different? Feel different?
- 5.** What first step are you willing to take this week?