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# Developing a Public Justice Perspective

Lexi Schnaser

**September 6, 2022**

Many of us, whether consciously or not, orient our livelihoods around the idea of human flourishing. We want what's best for our friends and families, and will go to great lengths to see them thrive. We choose careers where we work with people, develop new technologies, or pass on knowledge and wisdom to the next generation.

When I was preparing for college as a 17-year-old high schooler, I first thought I wanted to major in biology with the hopes of becoming a doctor. I loved my AP Biology class, and I wanted to help people. However, as I started my government and economics class senior year, I started to see a different way I could do so. In 2019, there was a lot going on politically, particularly among Christians involved in politics. I wanted to learn more about why people supported certain policies or issues and how those policies affect individuals and the country.

Now that I've (mostly) completed my degree in political science, I can see that at the heart of my questions was the idea of human flourishing. How do our political decisions actually affect us? Are we making responsible political decisions? How do my decisions affect my neighbors?

So, when it came time for me to apply for internships for the summer of 2021, the Center for Public Justice (CPJ) was one of my first choices, as a non-partisan Christian policy think tank in Washington D.C. The CPJ is committed to the idea of public justice, that "much of what contributes to human flourishing is not government's task" and "much of what contributes to human flourishing is government's task."<sup>1</sup>

Public justice provides a unique perspective to the question of human flourishing. Many of us have benefited from government supports, whether through stimulus payments during the COVID-19 pandemic, public libraries, roads and highways, and numerous other government programs. Many of us likely have also benefited from the support of organizations that are not affiliated directly with the government, such as think churches, food pantries, or even the helping hand of a neighbor. Approaching life with a public justice lens allows us to see the benefits and pitfalls of relying solely on government and civil society.

Something I appreciate about the public justice perspective is that it does not give only one answer to a problem. Addressing food insecurity in one community may look a lot different than in a community across the country.

God has given both government and civil society an important call to promote human flourishing. As politics and the world are ever-changing, the ways we fulfill our responsibilities may look different. Throughout my internship at CPJ, I spent a lot of time reading and listening to the stories of people working with a public justice perspective. For example, during the month of June, CPJ hosted a series of Instagram livestreams and welcomed professionals working in juvenile justice reform.<sup>2</sup> These professionals showed the importance of a public justice perspective in this context. Most of these organizations were working primarily at a very local level—with their courthouses, schools, and law enforcement. While they did have goals and initiatives to shape policies at a larger scale, they knew implementing change at a smaller level was more impactful. Several of these professionals worked with diversion programs—usually civil society organizations—that partnered with the legal system to help juveniles stay out of prison and give them the educational, emotional, and social support they need. This partnership allows government and civil society to fulfill their responsibilities to keep communities and their members safe. This livestream series happened at the beginning of my internship, and I'm grateful it did. I learned a lot about the importance of community organizations in promoting the general welfare.

Pluralism is an excellent way to produce the various needed answers to social and political questions, but I've discovered that sometimes the Reformed community I've grown to understand and appreciate in my time at Dorchtown can forget to listen to people's stories, or to listen to those who are working tirelessly in the field of public justice and Christian faith. Too often in our desire to be principled pluralists in a changing world, we lose sight of our basic principle to love one another. CPJ and others work hard to address issues out of love and relationship. This requires their solutions to be nuanced, and to reject the widely-used concept of right and left, conservative and liberal. My internship pushed me to look at issues in this light as well. As we talked about a variety of issues—paid parental leave, immigration, LGBTQ+ issues, and religious freedom—I tried to balance that question of “What would Jesus do?” with practical policy answers. In our efforts to further human flourishing, it is necessary that we look at issues this way, re-evaluating and rejecting narratives we've been taught in exchange for listening and acting in humility.

I have always had a heart for justice, and interning with CPJ allowed me to grow into my own public theology, as well as apply what I learned in the daily tasks of my internship. Part of Shared Justice's initiative is the annual Hatfield Prize,<sup>3</sup> a research scholarship awarded to three student-faculty pairs from CCCU schools for semester-long research projects into various social policies. As part of my internship, I conducted a program review of the Prize which included several interviews with now-graduated students and professors who had participated. These interviews were one of the most formative aspects of my internship. The people I interviewed showed me just how much I still had to learn. They were all actively creating relationships and partnerships in their communities as they addressed issues such as food insecurity, mental health, and predatory lending practices. Many of the recent graduates were still working closely with partners from their research. Listening to their reflections, stories, and future plans showed me both the difficulty for them to remain optimistic about their work and

encouragement they received from seeing young people like me, who were taking tangible steps to pursue justice for others.

I learned the most in my internship through listening and asking questions. I loved being able to engage with CCCU students and CPJ staff who had been involved in public policy issues for years. I grew in my abilities to apply the principles I was learning at Dordt in settings that were still very Reformed, but in more nuanced conversations about important issues. I learned to address views I didn't agree with by asking questions to better understand the other side, and to see if we had a common denominator in our differing perspectives. The clichéd question "What would Jesus do?" turned into an important query I asked myself daily as I examined and discussed policy perspectives and their effects on others. Pluralism and public justice can't be effective vehicles for human flourishing unless they focus on responding to people's needs. Response requires us to first listen to our neighbors, as Jesus did. Listening well to our neighbors requires relationships, and good relationships require effort and equity.

Justice can seem scary. It seems too big, too far away, too hard to achieve. However, God gives us a firm call to pursue justice for our neighbors, and He allows us great authority to do so. We can't achieve these things without working together in communities that are intentional about following this call. The Center for Public Justice is one place working towards these goals, and interning with them helped me to continue growing in my understanding of human flourishing. Political debates are often fruitless in the pursuit of justice, and frankly, in aiding human flourishing. Well-rounded policies must be created in a response to actual need, created in part and whole by those who it will affect.

Theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff presents the idea of shalom—God's picture for the world and human flourishing—not just as the achievement of justice, but a delight in justice for others and just relationships. As we go along through life trying to further the flourishing of our friends and family, we must expand these ideas to our neighbors and our enemies. Promoting human flourishing pushes us to go beyond simply 'being involved in politics.' The journey pushes us to listen, to understand, to reevaluate, and, most importantly, to develop relationships and grow in community.

1. [https://cpjustice.org/public/page/content/what\\_is\\_public\\_justice](https://cpjustice.org/public/page/content/what_is_public_justice)
2. <https://www.sharedjustice.org/domestic-justice/2021/6/28/transforming-juvenile-probation-series-a-conversation-with-tracee-perryman>
3. <https://www.sharedjustice.org/hatfieldprize2021>