

A Passion for Justice

The Catalyst

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Jan Boer is a long-time CPJ (Citizens for Public Justice) member who lives and works outside of Canada – in Jos, Nigeria. He began his work there in 1965, after the African country gained political independence from Great Britain. Since then he has observed first-hand the changes that have occurred in this struggling country. And true to CPJ style, he has not stood idly by in the process.

When he began his work in Nigeria, Jan Boer saw two problems: oppression of the poor by the elite, and a dualistic interpretation of the gospel by Christians in Nigeria.

Although since then Christians have become more involved in the political process, he believes that they are not doing so from a holistic Christian perspective, but in a more secular style, primarily trying to gain rights for their own religious community. While their concern for religious freedom is legitimate, it does not reflect a Christian approach to political activity, Boer believes.

Community Development

In his work with the Institute of Church and Society in Jos, he has tried to change all that. The Community Development Project which he helped establish is an excellent example of the work of the Institute – challenging Christians to apply the “Lordship of Christ” to all areas of life.

With this project, workers go to villages where people are trapped in poverty and feel powerless to change their situation. Together they read the gospel and encourage villagers to relate its message to their own experience. Many villagers gain new courage from this and, despite past disappointments, some decide to make one more effort to change their lives.

One group may decide to pool resources and build a bridge to better link their community with the larger local economy. Another group may try to get around

the “middleman” standing between them and a fair price for their wares in the market.

How is this related to the gospel? According to Boer, people change their self-image because of the message of Christ. Practical activities are the natural outflow of that new self-image. While earlier missionaries might have told Nigerians that God is not interested in political and social issues, Boer teaches that this is the gospel in its true power and richness, speaking to the whole person.

The Community Development Project is now running in thirty villages, and is wholly directed by Nigerians, with Boer serving as an occasional consultant.

External Debt

Another issue on which Boer has felt compelled to speak out is the external debt. The Institute organized seminars and workshops, challenging pastors, economists, church members and politicians to think about the issue and together work towards solving the problem. For those overwhelmed by the immensity of the problem, he says: “People have created it, people can solve it ... *if they want to.*” Recently, Boer has been encouraged by signs of Nigerians proposing creative methods of solving the problem.

Boer has gone beyond challenging Nigerians to tackle the problem. He points out that while in many cases Nigerian officials took personal advantage of generous loan offers, Western powers are also responsible. All along, various parties took advantage of the situation – from the original lenders to those who make decisions today regarding their investments. And in the end, the poor of Africa were left with an unreasonable burden of debt.

Thus Boer advises Christian churches in Nigeria to pressure their partner churches in the West; to ask them what they are doing to solve this injustice. For without a democratic swell of support, the problem will continue to burden Nigeria’s fragile economy.

Jan Boer has been involved in many other endeavours which illustrate his commitment. This includes developing a holistic health care initiative, collecting a library of resources, writing and editing a number of books (including *The Church & the External Debt* and *Caught in the Middle: Christians in Transnational Corporations*), and, most recently, trying to foster better co-operation between Muslims and Christians.

Challenge to CPJ

His final challenge to CPJ is interesting. He sees a tendency among Christians in Canada to support *either* missions *or* social justice. The dualism he saw in Nigeria is present in Canada as well. Hence he challenges us, too, to see church growth as holistic, integrating the “spiritual” message of the gospel with its many social implications.