

Foreword and Introduction to the Conversation

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All books are written within a particular historical context. Dennis Jacobsen's *Doing Justice* was first published fifteen years ago. That seems like a short time, but trends in our world and in the church that only some could then perceive have now become obvious to all but the most ostrich-like among us.

Fifteen years ago, we were only grasping at what it might mean for our lives and our daily news for our fears and our politics to be consumed by the prospect of terrorism. Climate change, while known and understood by many, had not yet produced the fifteen hottest years on record, begun to reshape agriculture from California to North Africa, and opened up travel routes through the Arctic.

The world has exploded around us with possibility and threat. While in the United States and in most of the world the gap in wealth between the rich and the poor has grown exponentially, movements for economic and racial justice have opened up political space for change that did not exist before. Both the Occupy Wall Street movement of a few years ago and the Black Lives Matter movement today have forced politicians and other power brokers to shift, slowly (as they always do),

toward positions and policies that take into account these and similar demands for justice.

This last development has not come without a backlash. While decades ago many of us began hearing the overtones of jingoism and ethnic cleansing in American politics, in 2016, one party is running a candidate who says these things out loud. As of this writing, the presidential race is not yet decided but no matter the outcome, millions of Americans will have voted for a man who spoke without shame about cutting our nation off from the rest of the world, of building walls, of rejecting people from whole religions; a man who has verbally degraded women, people of color, the physically challenged, and nearly anyone else who disagreed with him.

Fifteen years ago, many of us worried about the religious right and their growing competition with what we still called “mainline” denominations. In the time since then, we have seen the drastic decline in numbers in the mainline denominations. We are also beginning now to see a corresponding decline in those religious movements that were built on negating the liberalism of the mainline. Fifteen years ago, the denomination of which Dennis and I are both members, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, had scarcely finished celebrating the tenth anniversary of its creation as three historic Lutheran bodies came together. The ELCA was by far the largest Lutheran body in America and one of the largest Protestant denominations of any stripe. We hadn’t yet stopped congratulating ourselves on our denomination’s massive size, let alone begun to take stock of the very real possibility that we might also be one of the shortest-lived denominations in American history.

The ELCA is not alone in facing this new day. Depending on whose numbers and whose statistics we read, those who are actively part of a Christian congregation are now perhaps only 25 percent of the US population. Of those who do participate, the average age is pushing sixty years. While many people still respond to polls that they claim a faith allegiance, it seems more and more that the religious allegiances most Americans name to pollsters have more to do with habit or lack

of imagination than with any real commitment, contribution, or even attendance at services. We are, in common parlance, more and more a nation of “nones” and “dones”—those who claim some religion affiliation but are “done” practicing it.

All of this is why Dennis Jacobsen’s book is more needed now than when it was first published fifteen years ago. While the book is called “Doing Justice,” at its heart I believe Dennis is proposing not only a way of seeking justice but also a new way of being church. He writes from the perspective of established congregations and established denominations that are learning how to build public power to effect change in the world, but within that argument there is something more for our day. How do we go about being church now? How, when so many of the habits and patterns that once constituted the church are gone, can the body of Christ be the body of Christ today? Jacobsen begins chapter 11 with a quotation from Acts 4 that describes the earliest church organizing itself for mission in the world. We are in a comparable situation today. Nearly gone are many of the structures that we earlier relied on. What is left are people who may come to know each other, or not; who will discern a common path, a common faith, a common hope, or not. Jacobsen’s book is grounded in his own experience of this path to discernment and connection. It provides a set of tools for others to enable them to come along on that path.

The basic tools of organizing—the one-on-one conversation, for example, or agitation as transformative love—continue to be counter-cultural in a society where we are taught in so many ways to “keep to ourselves” and not “rock the boat.” *Doing Justice* explores these tools, grounds them in Christian experience, and invites us to put them to use.

Reading is often a solo activity. That is a challenge when the subject of the book is a new way of being together. This is not a book to read by yourself. If you are looking for a book to peruse and consider in solitary conversation with yourself alone, I could suggest other alternatives. Jacobsen is calling for *community*: he is writing not to people who want

only to think about community or read about community, but to those who want actually to *build* community with other people.

My job, here and in sidebars throughout the book, is to get such action-oriented conversations going. I will engage with Jacobsen along the way with questions and observations that are designed to invite you to do the same. If you are part of a congregation, ask others to join you in reading and reflecting on this book. If you are “done” with congregational life but still yearn to live your faith in community and toward justice, ask one or two others to read with you and to imagine with you what it would mean for you to practice the tools described.

I have used this book with members of my own congregation. It helped us order our thinking and our talking about justice and community; it tied that thinking and talking together with our faith in the resurrected Christ. In my own congregation, I used *Doing Justice* to accompany leading members of my congregation into actions of justice and into the trainings that our organization in Minnesota provided. Reading this book amid the work of organizing gave members of my congregation a text to reflect with as they practiced doing justice in our own community. There is nothing particularly new about the tools of organizing that Jacobsen lifts up, just as there is nothing particularly new about the gospel that drives his call for justice, but there is newness each time it is lived. What is new is that someone who actually lives in the complexities of congregational life and leads as a pastor is articulating how this works for him. Jacobsen uses stories from his own work and his own congregations to make it clear that this work and these practices are for regular people who feel God’s call on their life to change their communities.

The world might be just about done with many of the structures that have long identified the church and Christian faith, but the world is not done seeking hope and a way to live it out. Whether or not you are reading as a member of a traditionally structured church, *Doing Justice* can help you engage in that all-important work. A spirit runs through this book that says, “We can do this, and we are the only ones who will.”