

Just demands: Hondurans fight to make government work

by [Nicholas Wolterstorff](#) in the [July 27, 2010](#) issue

Most of us are aware of North American-based Christian organizations doing relief and development work in various parts of the so-called Third World, World Vision being the largest and perhaps the best known. Some of us are aware of North American-based Christian organizations dealing with one or another form of injustice in the Third World, International Justice Mission being the largest of these.

I want to describe the work of a Christian justice organization that is significantly different from all of these. It's the Honduras-based Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa (Association for a More Just Society). ASJ is indigenous to Honduras. It has chosen not to do relief and development work but to engage in the struggle against injustice, and it has crafted its struggle against injustice to fit the particulars of Honduran society—particulars that are very different from those of North American society. In particular, it has developed a distinct understanding of the task of the state in bettering the lives of the poor and of its own role as both a critic and an advocate of the state. The ASJ's work for justice has remained constant and with little variation whether carried out before the military coup of a year ago, during the coup or after the coup.

The Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa was founded in 2000 by Kurt Ver Beek and five others, four of them native Hondurans. Its staff has always been almost entirely Honduran, and its leadership is now entirely Honduran. While working for a North American relief organization, Ver Beek, a Calvin College graduate, saw the need for an organization that was indigenous to Honduras and focused not on relief and development but on dealing with the most egregious of the injustices in Honduran society. The association now has 55 people on its staff, about three-quarters of them women.

The association has three major projects: the Peace and Justice Project, which is a victims' rights program; the Labor Rights Project; and the Land Rights Project.

(Notice that ASJ is not shy of using the word *rights*.)

Roberto (he uses a pseudonym for security reasons) heads up the Peace and Justice Project; before coming to ASJ he worked in military intelligence and as an investigator into corruption cases for the Honduran tax collection service. The Peace and Justice Project provides investigative, legal and psychological aid to poor victims of violent crime and assists underequipped, overworked and frightened government officials in carrying out their responsibilities toward these victims; when necessary, it prods officials to carry out their responsibilities.

It is widely observed that the failure of Honduran officials to deal with crimes against the poor is due to corruption—graft and bribery. Both Roberto and Ver Beek maintain, however, that though there are indeed corrupt officials, the fundamental problem is not corruption but fear and a pervasive lack of trust. Poor people do not trust the police, the judicial system or the bureaucracy. The police do not trust the prosecutors, and the prosecutors do not trust the police. The result is that the poor are afraid to take action when they are the victims of crime; they fear that if they file a report with the police or some government official, the person or organization that wronged them will retaliate. The police and prosecutors likewise fear that they will suffer retaliation if they take action.

There is plenty of evidence that these fears are warranted. What I saw, more clearly than ever before during my visit in late March, is that justice is impossible in the midst of pervasive fear and distrust.

A missionary whom I talked to described Hondurans as the most passive people he had ever encountered (he had previously worked in the Dominican Republic and Haiti). By the end of my visit I had concluded that describing the Hondurans as passive is not accurate, nor is it correct to describe them as simply accepting the wrongs done to them. Though they put up with injustice, they do not cease to say, “This should not be.” It’s more accurate to describe them as believing that, because government cannot be trusted, there’s nothing to be done in bringing to justice those who have wronged them. Thirty years of democracy have brought them nothing.

I leave it to historians to explain how this climate of distrust developed, but the theology dominant in churches, both Protestant and Catholic, is intertwined with the ingrained habit of doing nothing when one is victimized. In the final judgment, the

theology says, God will punish those who perpetrate crimes and violate the law and will reward those who patiently put up with the wrongs done to them; it's not for us to undertake God's work. Paul's injunction in Romans 12, "Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord,'" is widely interpreted as meaning exactly this, I was told. It's not the business of Christians to bring those who perpetrate crimes and violate the law to the bar of earthly justice; meting out justice is God's business.

This is a serious and fateful misinterpretation of Paul. Paul is not saying that Christians are to refrain from seeking that justice be done to wrongdoers. He is saying that Christians are not to engage in tit-for-tat retribution. They are not to think in terms of repaying, of getting even, of exercising vengeance. Seeking justice is very different from trying to get even.

This otherworldly theology supports the habit of putting up with the wrongs because one doesn't trust government; conversely, the social habit gives relevance to the theology. When I talk to North American Christians about the biblical imperative to seek justice, the objection I often get is that love supersedes justice in the New Testament. This response reflects a very different theology and biblical exegesis from that which is dominant in Honduras, but the outcome is very nearly the same. Either way, Christians do not seek justice.

The Peace and Justice Project has targeted two impoverished neighborhoods in Tegucigalpa, one of 30,000 inhabitants and the other of 70,000, as places where it will stand alongside the victims of violent crime. When the police in these neighborhoods refuse or decline to investigate crime, whether because of lack of resources, because of fear of reprisal by criminals or because, even if arrests are made, fearful witnesses will refuse to testify, ASJ has stepped in to conduct investigations (the police have to verify the information and make arrests). It has assisted prosecutors in preparing criminal cases.

When witnesses refuse out of fear to testify in court, ASJ has employed a recourse allowed in Honduran law—that of "protected witnesses." Witnesses to a crime appear in court hooded from head to foot; as they testify, their voices are technologically altered. In the six years that the project has been operating, it has played a significant and often decisive role in the conviction of more than a hundred perpetrators of crime. Homicides in the targeted neighborhoods were reduced from 42 in 2005 to 9 in 2009; over the same period, the number of homicides throughout

Honduras more than doubled, from 2,155 to 5,012.

On a visit to one of the targeted neighborhoods, Villa Nueva, I was invited into a neat, small living room. Two women spoke of the rape of their daughters and told of how the police declined to do anything until ASJ intervened; the perpetrators were discovered, apprehended and convicted. A young man spoke of being shot and wounded and of how, in his case too, the police declined to do anything until ASJ intervened; the perpetrators were discovered, apprehended and convicted. There were no dry eyes in the crowded room.

ASJ operates in a similar way when it come to enforcing labor rights. Since 1954 Honduras has had a progressive set of labor laws—the outcome of a massive labor strike against two U.S. banana companies. When it comes to poor workers, however, the laws are often not enforced, partly because of the woefully inadequate resources of government investigators, partly because of fear on the part of investigators and prosecutors, and partly because workers fear that if they file a complaint, they will either become the victim of reprisals or be arbitrarily fired. (The high rate of unemployment means that there are always others to take the place of those who are fired.)

ASJ has concentrated its labor rights efforts on two of the most abused groups: cleaning workers and security guards. The association has now educated more than 7,000 workers on their rights and has been instrumental in winning cases for 135.

A number of companies in Honduras offer security guards on a contract basis to organizations and individuals. One of the companies most notorious for its treatment of employees is Setech. Setech employees are sometimes not paid for months at a time, they are forced to work 24-hour shifts, they are not paid overtime, and they are arbitrarily fired.

Dionisio Díaz García was one of the ASJ lawyers assigned to investigate the practices of Setech and other security and cleaning companies; he managed to bring many systematic violations of the labor laws to the attention of the authorities. On December 4, 2006, Dionisio was assassinated as he headed to court for a hearing involving security guards. Two men on a motorcycle pulled up alongside his car on a busy street in Tegucigalpa; one of them shot Dionisio at point blank range, and they sped off. Ver Beek told me that upon hearing the news he fully expected that most of the staff of ASJ would resign; the work was just too dangerous. Only one person

left.

Though the assassination of Dionisio occurred in broad daylight and was witnessed by a number of people, some in other cars, some sitting alongside the road selling things, it was only with great difficulty that ASJ was able to get any of these eye witnesses to talk. Eventually a few did, and the perpetrators were identified and apprehended. Both had worked for the Setech organization; the driver of the motorcycle was an active police officer at the time of the killing. Two of the witnesses testified as “protected witnesses” at the trial. The court found their testimony credible, and the two men were convicted of murder. Both are now in jail. ASJ is now working to help and prod Honduran justice authorities to identify and bring to justice those who planned and ordered the assassination.

Along with members of the Labor Rights Project, I had a chance to visit a 1,100-bed public hospital whose patients consist almost exclusively of the very poor; the care is free. We tried to engage some of the cleaning women in conversation, but they refused to talk. ASJ had recently learned that employees had been told by the company that if they are caught talking to anybody about how they are treated or paid, they would be summarily fired. Shortly, one of the top managers of the hospital appeared. He showed us around various areas of the hospital and explained to us that one of his biggest problems was what he called “the attitude” of some of the workers.

The hospital is surrounded by a high security fence; the gates were tended by guards wearing Setech uniforms. As we were waiting for our van to arrive, we found two guards who were willing to talk. Both told us that they were regularly forced to work 24-hour shifts. One said that he had not been paid for more than a month; the other, that he had not been paid for three months. They said this kind of treatment happened often. When we asked whether the company eventually gave them their back pay, they said that sometimes it did and sometimes it did not. Both were middle-aged men with families; the one who said he had not been paid for three months said he had seven children.

Why had they lost their fear of talking to strangers? That never became clear. Perhaps they had decided that being without a job would not be much different from having this sort of job.

Our group also visited the attorney general's office and met with the head of the division dealing with human rights violations, the head of the division dealing with crimes against children, and the director of the prosecutors in the Dionisio case. They expressed their gratitude for the many ways in which ASJ had been of assistance to them: conducting investigations, finding witnesses, encouraging witnesses to testify, lending cars to the prosecutors when they found themselves without transportation, and so forth.

It became clear in the course of the discussion, however, that ASJ was by no means a lapdog for the government. The ASJ representatives declared that they too appreciated the level of cooperation between their staff and that of the attorney general's office, but they made it clear that they would continue to file complaints, both verbal and written, when they found officials negligent in carrying out their responsibilities. The people from the attorney general's office nodded to indicate that they were well aware of this. I was struck by the large number of women in the upper echelons of the attorney general's staff. Someone remarked that women tend to be more courageous than men.

It was in the course of these discussions in the attorney general's office that the distinctive stance of ASJ toward government started to come into focus. The implicit assumption in everything ASJ does is that it is the task of government to establish justice by instituting a system of just laws, by enforcing those laws and by securing justice when the laws are violated. Given this assumption, ASJ does three things: it stands alongside the victims and defends their cause, it holds government officials responsible for enforcing the laws and finding and punishing violators, and it assists the officials in carrying out this task.

On the last two of these points: the association does not try to execute an end-run around government, nor does it content itself with dispensing aid and charity to victims; it holds government officials responsible. But it also does not content itself with issuing denunciations; it assists officials in carrying out their task. These observations led me to recall what St. Paul says concerning the task of government in chapter 13 of his letter to the Romans. Government, says Paul, is the servant of God for our good; God has assigned to it the task of "executing wrath on the wrongdoer." We are to give it "due respect."

Sitting in the Honduras attorney general's office, I found myself reflecting on how different ASJ's stance toward government is from that of the members of the Tea

Party movement currently sweeping across the U.S. The members of the Tea Party movement declare loudly that they want lower taxes, no deficits, less regulation of business, no bailouts, no regulation of firearms, no welfare—though it turns out that a good many of them are on Social Security and Medicare. Their rhetoric is relentlessly negative; they make no suggestion as to which programs should be cut or eliminated if government is both to lower taxes and eliminate the deficit. Government is the enemy; government deserves no respect. That it is the task of government to secure justice never crosses the lips of the Tea Party people.

According to a recent Quinnipiac University poll (as reported in the March 27 *New York Times*), Tea Party members are “disproportionately white evangelical Christian.” Apparently the evangelical Christians in the Tea Party movement have either not read Romans 13 or, if they have, don’t take it seriously.

The last afternoon of my visit to ASJ, I attended its meeting with the head of a large grocery chain and the head of the firm that does cleaning work on contract for the chain. ASJ has been publicizing and protesting some of the abusive ways in which the cleaning firm treats its workers; a 60-year-old cleaning woman who had been ordered to take a pregnancy test or be fired had come along with the ASJ team. The head of the firm was clearly very angry at ASJ:

People in Honduras are always playing the victim. You should have asked my permission before you talked to my workers. There are always people who complain. I’ve got rights too. Why don’t you talk about my rights, why do you only talk about their rights? The Bible tells us to love our neighbors. I’m helping these people by giving them jobs. Let’s talk about Christian principles. I’m using my talents. The Bible says that those who are given many talents must use them. I was given many talents. We all have the right to get more than we have. Let the state regulate what I do; you stay out of it. I’m not going to let anybody tell me how to run my company. Leave me alone. I can sue you for slander. I insist on the freedom to do what I want to do. I don’t owe anybody any explanations.

Land ownership in Honduras is often obscure and contested, a problem that is the focus of ASJ’s Land Rights Project. Tegucigalpa is built on a series of steep ridges; over the past 30 years or so there has been a large influx of poor people who have built houses on ridges in outlying areas. Though newcomers always pay someone for their plot of land, often it is not clear if they have paid the right party. Sometimes

they never receive a title even though they paid the asking price; sometimes the title they received proves invalid.

Five years ago the government passed a land reform act that allows residents, after paying a fair price for their plots or establishing that they have already paid a fair price, to get clear title to their plot. ASJ has assisted some 60,000 poor families in the Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula areas in getting such titles. In Los Centenos, one of the neighborhoods where ASJ has been active, residents were immensely proud of their land titles; they displayed them and asked to be photographed holding them.

What I found just as impressive and moving was something ASJ workers took for granted: the area we visited contained four distinct communities, and whereas the city installed water, sewer and electrical systems in middle-class neighborhoods, each of these poor communities had had to install these systems on its own. In order to do so and deal with other business, each had instituted an organizational structure with a president, a vice-president, a secretary and a treasurer. Candidates were nominated for these offices, and the community held an election. Women were prominent among the officers. This was small-scale democracy at work. This was activity, not passivity. It was one more accomplishment of an indigenous organization which, in the name of Christ, defends the cause of the downtrodden and, with great tenacity and courage, both insists that the government bring to justice those who have wronged them and assists government in doing so.