

Advice to Students Considering an International Human Rights Career

*The secret of success in life is for a
man to be ready for his time when it comes.*
Benjamin Disraeli

International Justice Mission receives a tremendous number of inquiries from Christian students who are interested in a career in the field of international human rights. The passionate interest of these students is a great encouragement to us at IJM, and it represents immeasurable hope for those who suffer injustice in our world and for those who are yearning to see a courageous and authentic witness for Christ in dark places. Equally encouraging is the thoughtful way these students are pursuing practical questions about how they might prepare themselves for effective service. God is glorified by missionary doctors, famine fighters and church planters who demonstrate a rigorous commitment to excellence through careful, thoughtful preparation for service. In the same way, those who seek to serve God by bringing rescue to victims of oppression begin their journey of excellence by thinking hard about how they might prepare themselves for their work.

Accordingly, we would like to offer a few candid words of guidance that we hope interested students will find helpful. It is, of course, impossible to chart the right course for any specific student, and in the end we rely on God's promises for direction (Proverbs 3:5-6) and wisdom (James 1:5-6). God has already given clear guidance to *all* Christians: they are to be engaged in the work of justice (Isaiah 1:17; Micah 6:8; Matthew 23:23). For those who are exploring a career in international human rights, we would like to provide the following food for thought.

Students who are interested in a career in human rights would be well served by educational preparation that focuses on the foundations of faith, professional skill and crosscultural training for effective service in the field.

A *Christian* witness for justice is built on a relationship with Jesus Christ, the One Christians regard as God and the source of all justice, compassion, power, truth and goodness. Accordingly, the strength and ultimate usefulness of our Christian witness for justice flows from the grace of God and our investment in the intimacy and quality of our relationship with our Maker. Accordingly, we advise those most zealous for justice to begin their journey by deepening their companionship with the God of justice. For a Christian, a career in justice brings power, joy and sustainability when it is built on a strong spiritual foundation in Christ (Psalm 127:1).

Knowing that engagement in human rights corresponds to God's command to seek justice for the oppressed, the strength of our resistance to evil comes directly from our complete reliance on God, the One who is most offended by evil. Sincere study, prayer and worship are the channels through which God builds this foundation. When we begin to understand how our heavenly Father feels about the world we live in, we are more able to act in ways that honor him. Service to the oppressed finds its unyielding determination in a life focused on Christ, seeking his glory and following his example of love. As Oswald Chambers writes, "Service is the overflow which pours from a life filled with love and devotion. . . . Service is what I bring to the relationship and is the reflection of my identification with the nature of God."¹

Public Justice Skills: Investigation and Intervention

Building on a foundation of devout faith, the human rights profession is built on two unique disciplines: investigation and intervention. As deception and violence are tools of the oppressive perpetrator, investigation and intervention expose the deception and bring protective power to bear on behalf of the victim.

¹ Oswald Chambers, "The Call of the Natural Life," *My Utmost for His Highest* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1992), January 17.

Investigation is the tool necessary to address the deception used by oppressors to cover up their deeds. Proverbs 10:11 affirms this principle: “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, / but the mouth of the wicked *conceals* violence” (NRSV). Vocationally, training in the legal or law enforcement professions provides a particular focus on the hard work of exposing the truth and finding the facts amid confusion, conflict and lies. Lawyers and law enforcement professionals are trained specifically in fact finding, exposing lies and demonstrating *with proof* the innocence or guilt of the accused. Since the human rights field requires this same skill, the student would be well served by experience and education in the fields of law or law enforcement. Another critical path is that of social workers, who help victims of abuse uncover some truths as well: that victims are *valuable*, that they deserve *justice*, that they can *heal*. Their role in supporting the victim through the justice process is invaluable.

The discipline of intervention relates to the oppressor’s use of violent coercion to dominate the victim’s environment and decisions. To combat this misuse of power, students must learn how to access power on behalf of those who are vulnerable. An expertise in social, political, economic and governmental power—a knowledge of where power resides and how it is exercised—is important. From a broad perspective the academic disciplines of government, international relations, politics and history can provide a strong foundation of study. More specifically, a background in law enforcement (through law enforcement academies, investigative training and experience), as a lawyer or as a social worker are three ways to equip oneself for international human rights work. There are certainly other paths students can follow into this work; however, we will focus this discussion on these vocations, as each of them offers a fairly structured path to gain experience.

A student who wants to pursue a career in international human rights work must develop the capacity to translate his or her professional skills into a crosscultural, developing-world context. The ability to function, solve a problem and live in the developing world transforms the student-as-tourist into a problem-solving participant in a foreign and economically underdeveloped society. Every bit of time spent overseas helps, but opportunities that extend beyond two months are generally more significant. Specific experiences might include summer or semester mission trips in the developing world, study-abroad programs conducted with a foreign university, the Peace Corps, nongovernmental organization volunteer opportunities and business start-ups in a developing context.

These experiences allow students to develop and test their capacity to contribute in the difficult environment where the poor spend each day, which includes dirt, inconvenience, sickness, bugs, risk and physical discomfort. More important, such experiences test students’ capacity for the deeper and indispensable qualities of humility, attentiveness, compassion, patience and faith.

Career in Law

For those who are interested in pursuing a law degree, we offer the following suggestions. First, we must confront the brutal truth about the way the legal profession allows law schools to sort graduations of promising legal talent. There is a clearly understood ranking of law schools by reputation (published in magazines and books), and the legal profession doles out its introductory opportunities largely on the basis of the reputation of the school an applicant comes from. There are exceptions to the rule, of course, but students should not underestimate the general power and pervasiveness of the rule. In addition, most law students will get a better education at a better-ranked law school, not because the law professors are so much better or the course content much different, but because the caliber of students will be better. Accordingly, students will be pushed to think harder and get more out of their education by the peers around them.

As a general matter, students should try to go to the highest-ranked law school they can. Many schools advertise special offerings such as international law and human rights, but for students seeking to optimize their career options these advertised areas of special interest do not generally make up for the institutions’ less-esteemed reputation. If a higher-ranked school is an option, a student would be ill-advised to attend a law school on a lower tier because of advertised specialties, “quality of student life” or geography (unless you know you want a job in that particular locality).

Once in law school, students interested in a career in human rights would be well-advised to take available courses that focus on (1) the battle over facts (litigation, civil and criminal procedure, evidence, etc.), (2) governmental institutions and processes of power (constitutional law, administrative law, government

relations, legislative process, public policy, etc.) and (3) substantive international and human rights law. Clinical opportunities for litigation service and relationships with professors who can open doors for research, job experience, clinical experience or clerkships in the three areas mentioned previously are good investments of your time.

It will be important to develop a long-term vision of a job or place of employment that is most appealing. Human rights work is accomplished at human rights NGOs, public law institutions (such as the Department of Justice) and private firms (using the vehicle of pro bono legal work). During law school use the first summer to experiment, the second to establish a “foot in the door” and the third to gain employment.

Finally, a student interested in pursuing the special joys and holy calling of human rights service must be undergirded with perseverance and a long-term commitment to a vocational pursuit of justice. The gifts of advocacy are extremely valuable. There will be many bidders for your service, and you must find a way to stay committed to the clientele you want to serve with your gifts. The poor and oppressed will have the least to offer in terms of the compensation normally tendered to the profession—the least money, the fewest perks, a lower professional status and little renown. So, what will sustain your commitment as the bidding war increases, as your training makes you more valuable? Only one thing: a clear understanding, in advance, of what you want in exchange for your services.

Consider students who head to medical school with the vision of becoming missionary doctors in the developing world. Over time their training makes them very valuable, and they find themselves in a bidding war of opportunities. Generally, anything a doctor does is good and noble, but there definitely is a spectrum of need, both in terms of the urgency of the suffering and the availability of those who can meet the need. There are those who need surgery for a gunshot wound in the inner city, those who need a cure for their cancer, those who need knee surgery to play next season, those who need a tummy tuck. Various clientele will make aggressive bids for the service of medical students. What will sustain these medical students in their vision for overseas ministry among the poor?

Likewise the legal profession offers a variety of perfectly honorable opportunities, but they exist on a spectrum of moral and monetary urgency. Some in the legal profession put violent criminals behind bars and keep the innocent free, some help a business play by the rules, some give an offending corporation its best argument in court, and some (very few) actually lie and cheat for whoever will pay. It will be easier, more lucrative and safer for law students to offer their gifts of advocacy to serve these clientele than to serve the victims of oppression overseas, those who are most in need of a witness of Christ’s love and God’s justice. What will sustain these law students in their vocational vision to “the least of these”?

Only a clear, advance conviction: the students who equip themselves with the tools of advocacy to follow Christ in service to the most needy in our world and are prepared to receive the compensation that Christ alone offers—joy, peace, meaning, love, holiness and a treasure that is eternal.

Career in Law Enforcement

A career in law enforcement enables you to bring the protection of the rule of law to the weak and vulnerable. If you are interested in pursuing an international human rights career, a law enforcement career should include all aspects of policing. This would be tremendously helpful in future interactions with the victims of various types of crimes and in probable encounters with government officials. Students should focus on active criminal investigative experience and seek a high level of professional training.

Most law enforcement agencies will not hire anyone under the age of twenty-one. Use that to your advantage. Course study involving the police sciences will help you understand how investigation and reporting affect judicial procedures. Courses in technical writing, public speaking, psychology and sociology with an international emphasis give you insights into the cultures around you. Some local programs such as explorer posts, ride-alongs and citizen neighborhood watch organizations allow you to observe law enforcement in action. Most state agencies maintain similar programs. At the federal level there are employment options that allow you to interact with law enforcement indirectly in portions of an investigation. All of these will allow you to look at the inner workings and see how the systems of law enforcement function in reality. IJM needs to interact with various facets of law enforcement in the communities we have been called to work in. There is a need for law enforcement professionals committed to ensuring that all

people are protected by the rule of law at the federal, state and local levels. Deciding where to work will involve your personal preferences, adaptability and ultimately God's will in your life.

Career in Social Work

Due to the wide range of issues involved in providing aftercare to victims of violent abuse, the most practical course of study for someone wishing to pursue an international aftercare career is social work. A master's degree in social work, with concentrations of study in both community development and clinical practice provides the student with knowledge and experience on a macro level, but within the context of the needs of individuals and families. A graduate school offering an international concentration combining fieldwork, courses on advanced policy and advanced practice courses is highly recommended. Experience-based academic programs incorporating international internship opportunities into the curriculum are a vital part of the learning process.

Seek a graduate program that equips you to learn how to build partnerships and collaborative relationships while learning the principles of human rights and global justice. Crosscultural studies, program design, monitoring and evaluation are invaluable as well. Most important, discover what you are most passionate about through reading, research and continuing-education programs. God has put this in your heart for a reason, but passion alone is not sufficient to provide healing care to clients of injustice.

Choose a reputable, ranked graduate school with a commitment to international social work. Ensure professors are doing research in international issues, engaged with international forums or professional societies, and are willing to accommodate your special interests and mentor you. Also inquire as to whether the graduate school has international students in the program each year. The greater the number of international students, the more opportunity you will have to learn from them, establish contacts with international social workers around the world, and engage in international student group activities.

Every social work graduate student participates in two fieldwork experiences, one each year of graduate school. Find out what fieldwork opportunities are offered in the program to ensure that you have choices that would give you solid experience related to your field. You don't necessarily have to have an international-oriented field placement to gain experience that will help you if you pursue international social work in the future. For example, if you want to work in aftercare with trafficking survivors overseas, doing your field practicum at a local rape crisis center would give you credible experience in crisis response, rape trauma, counseling, legal services and the healing process. If you want to work with slavery or police-brutality issues overseas, doing your field practicum at a local refugee resettlement center would provide you invaluable experience working with translators and understanding grief and loss issues, the process of transition and resettlement, torture and war trauma issues, resiliency and recovery, community development and healing, and more.

Other Career Connections to Global Justice

Though you may not be pursuing a career in law, law enforcement or social work, you can play a vital role in global justice. IJM and other justice-oriented groups rely on the expertise of people with extensive training in international relations, government relations and human rights program monitoring and design. In order to secure rescue for victims of oppression, we also rely on the skills of excellent administrators, accountants, human resources and IT professionals. Pastors, seminary professors and ministry trainers expose people to God's passion for justice and his plan to use his people to rescue the oppressed. Missionaries and frontline relief-and-development workers play an instrumental role in reporting cases of injustice and oppression. Writers, producers, artists and media professionals who tell the stories of God's work in rescuing the victims of abuse are critical in advancing the cause of justice in the world. We invite you to pursue a lifelong vocational journey in the ministry of justice, a journey of excellence, creativity, adventure and joy.