



# Ground Motive

Dialogue at the intersection of philosophy, religion & social ethics

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## Expanding Our Response To the Call of Justice: An Interview with Gerda Kits

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*Gerda Kits is Assistant Professor of Economics at The King's University in Edmonton, Alberta. Her research brings the insights of economics to bear on real-world problems, notably ecological issues such as agriculture and conversations surrounding the Alberta oilsands. Additionally, Kits is concerned with the ways in which people of faith interact with issues of justice, and her work attempts to help professionals and non-professionals better understand their place and role in the complex web of social and environmental issues facing us today.*

*The following is an interview carried out by e-mail between Dean Dettloff, Post-Conference Animator for the CPRSE, and Dr. Kits.*

**Ground Motive:** Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview, Gerda. To start, let's talk a bit about the intersection of justice and faith. Our society seems to be ambivalent about whether or not faith makes a difference when pursuing questions of justice and their solutions. Some say it should be treated neutrally, as a personal commitment that should be held away from one's research and projects. Others suggest faith is inextricably part of how one interacts with identifying injustice and working toward justice. What have you found in your work on these issues?

**Gerda Kits:** First, faith is one of the reasons many of us work for justice. Pursuing justice is an imperative for Christians - it's all over the Bible. That's not to say that all Christians have to work for justice in the same areas, or in the same ways; there are many different forms it can take. But we all need to be engaged somehow, because it's an integral part of our faith.



But faith also shapes how we understand justice. Sometimes justice is perceived narrowly as simply respecting the rule of law, or not discriminating against people, etc. In my understanding of the Bible, Christians ought to have a much fuller and more holistic idea of justice as restoring right relationships, and making sure people are able to live out their God-given calling. That goes far beyond simply obeying the law, towards taking positive steps to ensure people have access to all the different kinds of resources and relationships they need to flourish. So the specific issues we decide to pursue, and the solutions we propose, are going to be fundamentally shaped by our faith as well.

**GM:** You have done work on the oilsands of Alberta, which you presented at the "Are We There Yet?" conference, and much of your research seems to take ecology in particular seriously. Given your insights into the relationship between justice and faith, how does this inform some of the projects you yourself have taken on as research interests?

**GK:** If we understand justice as restoring right relationships, then that includes relationships between humans and the rest of creation. I believe that we are called to be stewards of

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creation - to use it to meet our needs and the needs of others, but also to care for it as something that is good in itself, and that we have been commanded to take care of.



So what does that mean for the oilsands? Most of the mainstream economic analysis of the oilsands focuses solely on how we can use them to enable economic growth, create jobs and earn government revenue. When the serious environmental issues that result from oilsands extraction are acknowledged, the common response is to assert either that new technologies will solve the problem, or that the economic benefits outweigh the negative impacts.

From a stewardship/ justice perspective, I find those responses totally inadequate and irresponsible. I think decision-making on oilsands developments needs to take environmental and social issues around the oilsands far more seriously than it currently does. There are concrete ways we could do that, if the political will was there. For example, one simple step would be to insist on a cost-benefit analysis of every oilsands project before approving it. It's a widely accepted technique and there's no reason for us not to be doing it. It wouldn't solve the problem by any means, but it would be one step in the right direction.

Through my work on the oilsands, I have also become increasingly aware of the negative environmental and social impacts that our current approach has had on Aboriginal people living in that region. They have been speaking out about it for years, but no one seems to be listening. That's another fundamental issue of injustice that must be addressed before oilsands development goes any further.

**GM:** *Your work interacts with questions of the "public good" of society. Could you say something about what it means to work toward a common goal in a pluralistic society? How might we identify that goal, and how can we partner with our neighbors to achieve it?*

**GK:** I like what Gerald Vandezande had to say on this subject. He advocated finding points of agreement and working together on those, without feeling that we need to agree on everything. Working for justice can be overwhelming, because there's so much to be done - but that also means there are lots of opportunities for collaboration. We can look for the areas of common ground where we can work together. And when we disagree, we can do that respectfully, acknowledging that none of us have all the answers and that we will probably learn more by discussing the issue together than by attacking or ignoring each other.

The example I gave above about doing cost-benefit analysis of oilsands projects is an example of this. I think we should do this because it's one way we can work toward being better stewards of creation. Lots of non-Christians who disagree with my starting point would still agree with me that this should be done, though for different reasons. In fact, there are several other economists who have called for it. We come at the issue from different perspectives, but we can agree that this would be a good step to take. We also might disagree about the next steps to be taken, but at least we can work together to push for this one.



**GM:** *One thing that sticks out to me about your work is your commitment to making these issues understandable to folks who are not naturally involved in these conversations professionally, as academics or social workers. For people of faith, and Christians in particular, looking to get involved in justice issues, how do you recommend they start? How can local communities work together on these problems?*

**GK:** I'd suggest that the best way to get started would be to connect with one of the non-government organizations that's already active on justice issues. There are many good ones out there - Citizens for Public Justice, Kairos, Make Poverty History, and the Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue are just a few that come to mind. There are a number

of ways those organizations can help you get started. Their websites all have lots of information on a variety of justice issues, to help you become more informed. You can sign up for newsletters or emails that will alert you to campaigns and opportunities to take action - sometimes it's as easy as signing an online petition or writing an email to your Member of Parliament. Some organizations, like Kairos, have local groups that you can join. Many denominations also have offices that focus on justice issues and provide resources. There are so many resources out there, the difficulty is more in choosing something to focus on than finding opportunities to act.

If you're interested in starting up a local community, church or school social justice group, there are resources for that as well. Two I'd recommend are CPJ's advocacy toolkit and a handbook for student groups that I wrote years ago - I know it's shameless self-promotion, but I think there's still some helpful stuff in it, although most of the links are out of date. I'm sure there are others as well.

**GM:** *As we close, what are your hopes for people of faith as they work toward a more just future?*



**GK:** I think the main thing for us to remember is that even though we can't do everything, we can still do something. The more we learn about justice issues, the more we grasp their complexity and scope. We start to realize that no one really knows how to fix some of the problems we face, or that the political will to adopt solutions, even ones we know about, is simply not there. We can end up paralyzed, so overwhelmed or frustrated that we don't even know where to start,

and so we end up doing nothing. We have to remember that it's not our job to save the world - that's God's job. Bob Goudzwaard talks about taking steps along God's Way of justice and peace. We don't know what the grand solutions are, but we don't need to. We are simply called to walk forward in faith, practicing discernment and humility, trusting that God will guide our steps. I think that is what will give us hope and strength to continue.

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