

# Alumni Profile - Mark Wollenberg

by Tim Willson



*Taylor alumnus Mark Wollenberg ('80) visited the campus recently to discuss the work of International Justice Mission, where he serves as Western Canadian Regional Representative.*

*“I am seeing  
a stirring in the church  
to grow in the knowledge  
of what it means  
to act justly.”*

**Student:** NABC '80 (BAR) (attended 1975-76, 1977-80)

**Hometown:** Langley, BC

**Home Church:** North Langley Vineyard (*pastored here for 10 yrs*)

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**Q: Mark, you are working with International Justice Mission, a highly-respected justice ministry -- can you take a moment to explain IJM's mission and what your role is as part of that organization?**

A: IJM is a Christian human rights organization that rescues victims of violence, sexual exploitation, slavery and oppression in 13 countries, with 17 field offices around the world. Teams of IJM lawyers, investigators and aftercare professionals work with local officials to ensure immediate victim rescue and aftercare, to prosecute perpetrators and to ensure that public justice systems - police, courts and laws - effectively protect the poor. These teams work tirelessly to intervene on behalf of those who suffer at the hands of human traffickers and business owners who profit from their businesses on the backs of slaves. In many places in the world there simply is no enforcement of the rule of law, especially for the poor. IJM takes the biblical call to “Seek justice and encourage the oppressed” (Isa. 1:17) as God's desire for his people to join him in this work of bringing justice to those who have no voice.

My role in serving at IJM is as the Western Canadian Regional Representative for IJM Canada. My role is to raise awareness about the work that IJM does by educating people in churches, schools, and businesses and to engage people to begin their own justice journey. I live in Langley, BC with my wife Brenda.

**Q: You have a background in pastoral ministry and now in "para-church ministry" -- tell us more about where your ministry journey has taken you and about the lessons you have been learning.**

A: I was a pastor and church planter for 25 years before I began working with IJM. One of the things that stuck with me from my New Testament theology class at Taylor was that Jesus was focused on the proclamation and demonstration of the Kingdom of God. One of the defining marks of that kingdom was a bias towards the poor (Luke 4:18). As a pastor, I was constantly guiding our church communities to find various ways to remember the poor around us.

I also began to travel to Asia and India where I encountered a whole new level of poverty existing in the world. However what I also saw in my travels was that poverty makes people vulnerable to those who can (and often *will*) abuse their power and take advantage of the poor. I noticed children were forced to work in slave-like conditions in sweat shops, and that young girls and women were forced into prostitution. Not only did I notice these conditions, but I observed that it did not seem as if anyone was defending the interests of the most vulnerable people in the world.

Upon returning to Canada after one of these trips I began to look at the scriptures again to see what God had to say about injustice. It is very clear when you look at what he says - He *hates* it! I remember preaching through the Book of Amos and realizing that not only does he hate injustice but he also gets upset when his people do nothing to oppose it. I began a journey of thinking about how the church can once again orient itself around a text like Micah 6:8 (“*Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God*”) or the restating of this verse by Jesus in Matt. 23:23.

I have come to believe that the mission of God to restore and redeem a broken world must include what we have called evangelism (helping people walk humbly with God), loving mercy by alleviating suffering that comes from people lacking the basic necessities of life (food, basic medical care, education, clean water), and ALSO a commitment to act justly - which requires us to defend the vulnerable and intervene on behalf of those who are oppressed.

I think the church has done quite well in the first two requirements. But right now I am seeing a stirring in the church to grow in the knowledge of what it means to act justly. This is why it is such a joy for me to work with IJM at this time. There is a readiness to begin to engage in a lifestyle of justice. It means we think about what we purchase and consume and ask ourselves was this product made on the back of a slave in another part of the world. If it is then we can choose not to buy it and look for an alternative choice. Acting justly also means that we look at issues of trafficking of women in the sex trade in our own cities and towns. I recently met a mother whose daughter was trafficked from Calgary to New York and then to Las Vegas where she disappeared. We need our city, and federal politicians to take seriously these issues that occur here in Canada as well as in other parts of the world.

***Q: What is your sense of how well the church is responding to the great needs of the world (human trafficking, human rights abuses, poverty, hunger, etc.)? Churches are sometimes portrayed as being less engaged with than we have been in the past (or than we could be); in your view, is that a fair characterization?***

A: I answered this earlier, but let me expand. The church is starting to realize that acting justly is something that is required of us by scripture, but many of us have little knowledge about the kind of injustice that takes place in the world today. I think again of Jesus' words in Luke 4:18 when he quoted the prophet Isaiah and said that he had come to bring freedom to the captives and release for the prisoners. Today, most of us live without the knowledge that there are approximately 27 million slaves in the world. Most people do not know that there are more slaves in the world today than the 1800's, when slaves were ripped out of Africa in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. These are people who are forced to work in cocoa and coffee plantations, brick kilns and rice mills, or in brothels and they have no option to leave. They are literally owned by someone else who sees them as a source of revenue for themselves. After drug dealing, human trafficking is tied with the illegal arms industry as the second largest illegal enterprise in the world today (The ILO estimates the total market value of human trafficking to be in excess of USD \$32 Billion a year).

There are people today who need an advocate, someone to raise their voice on behalf of the voiceless, and say “Slavery must come to an end.” While I do not want to make huge generalizations I would say that those who are in their 30's and younger really get that the “gospel” message must include this required aspect of seeking justice. If the church wants to find relevancy and resonance with this generation then it must begin to look at how it will disciple people to act justly, along with loving mercy and walking humbly with God.

The last church that I pastored was very involved in learning what it meant to act justly. It created some great conversations as well as ministry outlets for our people to begin to live this out.



***Q: If I recall correctly, your roommate during your Taylor years was none other than Harry Lehotsky: what was that like?***

A: Yes, I did room with Harry Lehotsky for two years at NABC, and he certainly did have an influence upon my thinking about justice issues. We used to have these long conversations about what would happen if the church would see that justice was not a side issue for the few radicals, but a mainstream part of the life of a community. I think Harry was more courageous than most of us and went and lived among the poor right out of the starting blocks. When Harry was in seminary—and then when he graduated from seminary—he knew that he needed to live where the need was greatest. It took some of us a little

longer to get to where he was, but more and more we realize that the good news of the gospel truly is good news to those who are poor, oppressed and enslaved (and I am not just talking about *spiritually* oppressed).

I have heard stories and met individuals who were rescued and released from brothels where they were raped up to 20 times a day for the profit of their owner. The Kingdom of God breaks into our world when they are set free from those places of evil and darkness and given the opportunity to heal and begin a new life. I have a picture of a little girl who was born into slavery in a rice mill, but then the very next day after her birth she was rescued by our IJM team and local police. Her future has been forever altered. Before, it was one that had no hope—her parents were slaves and it was likely she would continue to suffer a similar fate in this same rice mill. But everything changed that day she was proclaimed free. Every time I look at her picture it reminds me that the good news we proclaim is truly good news to those who are enslaved.

One final comment about Harry. Harry really did give me a picture of “what could be” when the gospel—that includes justice—is proclaimed and demonstrated in the world.

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*-Mark Wollenberg ('80)*

**Q: When you think back on your student days, what stands out to you? What were some of the blessings from that time that have borne fruit for you?**

A: Probably the things that stand out for me about my time at NABC were the friendships and relationships that came from that time. I still count some of my closest relationships as those that were formed at NABC. While I may not see these people as much as I used to there is a deep bond that was established in my 4 years at NABC.

**Q: What are some of the things you are learning or the ways in which you are being stretched right now?**

A: I am thinking about how the call to act justly actually engages us as followers of Jesus in conversations with those who do not know him yet. I spoke at the UVic Law School in January of this year (the Christian Law Students invited me to come in and hosted a lunch for any other law students who wanted to join). There were about 60 people who ended up coming. I was warned that students (in particular law students at UVic) were pretty anti-Christian and that I should be prepared for some negative reaction when I mentioned that IJM was a Christian Human Rights organization. What I found was completely the opposite: the law students were very intrigued by what IJM was doing in the world. They asked about how my faith informed the work that IJM does in rescuing people who are oppressed. I think that if there is a way to show the world that we as followers of Jesus are engaged in the work of justice—and in many cases going to the most violent and evil places on earth—we can have a wonderful opportunity to help others along on their own faith journey.

**Q: Finally, how can the Taylor family be part of your ministry at IJM -- what are your needs and opportunities?**

A: Taylor can be a part of the work of IJM by doing what you already have done. You hosted a lunch time discussion with one of our IJM staff members who served in Cambodia as an aftercare worker with young girls (some as young as 5 or 6) who had been rescued from brothels. You are training leaders who will hopefully convey God's passion for justice and his desire to see his followers join him in the work of seeking justice.

You can also encourage people to check out our IJM Canada website at [www.ijm.ca](http://www.ijm.ca) and to find ways to support the work of justice around the world. IJM also has opportunities for people to do internships with us. While some of those internships are for people who have completed social work or law degrees there are a variety of other opportunities (communications, church relations, and government relations). TB



*Mark Wollenberg is the Regional Representative (Western Canada) for International Justice Mission. Before joining IJM Canada, Mark was a pastor for 25 years, leading established churches and developing four new church communities in Edmonton, AB and Yellowknife, NT; he most recently served as senior pastor of the North Langley Vineyard Church.*

*Mark has coached pastors and church planters in Canada and a number of countries in Asia, and has helped lead various city-wide inter-church events. He holds degrees from Taylor and Regent College. Mark and Brenda have five children; they reside in Langley, BC.*

*Churches in Western Canada that would like to have Mark come and share about justice and the work of IJM can contact him at [mwollenberg@ijm.ca](mailto:mwollenberg@ijm.ca). People in Central and Eastern Canada can email the office at [engage@ijm.ca](mailto:engage@ijm.ca). In the US, email [contact@ijm.org](mailto:contact@ijm.org).*

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