

Good practice in deeds and advocacy: Churches involvement in advocacy on difficult issues

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What is Advocacy?

As Christians we recognize that there are many groups and communities around us facing injustice and oppression, and we must act. We must address the complex realities within our world that create such problems, and avoid any spiritual laziness that tempts us to rely on excuses and not responses. Advocacy is our response to these situations.

Advocacy is never just about raising awareness of an issue, a problem or a situation. It is always about trying to seek change in the policies, practices, systems, structures, decisions and attitudes that cause poverty and injustice, so that they work in favour of people living in poverty.

Advocacy is about people. People based advocacy helps people realize their power, and use it to participate effectively in making and shaping public decisions. Deep and strong involvement of ordinary citizens, especially disadvantaged and marginalized, serves the purpose that advocacy is a means to help people realize their power and give effective input in the decision making processes.

Advocacy is Value-Based (i.e., for a Just Cause): to be involved in advocacy, groups should have a fair cause they are fighting for and struggling to address as a starting point or a platform to achieve social justice. Those involved in doing social justice advocacy should be aware of their values as they determine the issues and advocacy strategies they use in doing advocacy.

Throughout the New Testament Jesus intentionally, purposefully, and passionately addressed very specific causes. Jesus wasn't just preaching a message of spiritual salvation for the world, but he also addressed specific political, social, and racial issues. He was helping those who were being abused, violated, and oppressed.

Advocacy is one of the roles of leadership

We can think of Abraham, when God tells him that he is going to destroy Sodom (Genesis 18). Abraham's response is to intercede with God. He bargains with God to show mercy on the city for an increasingly small number of good people who might be found there.

“Lord, when you destroy the evil people, are you also going to destroy those who are good? Wouldn't you spare the city if there are only fifty good people in it? You surely wouldn't let them be killed when you destroy the evil ones. You are the judge of all the earth, and you do what is right.”

***Advocacy:** Influencing the decisions, policies and practices of powerful decision-makers, to address underlying causes of poverty, bring justice, and support good development.*

Through his ministry Jesus intentionally addressed specific political, social, and racial issues.

Leaders take responsibility for those around them and at least try to save the world, even if people are too wicked to actually listen

And then he works his way down from 50 to 10 people...

When the people of Israel get Aaron to make them a golden calf God threatens to destroy all of them, just keeping Moses and his descendants instead (Exodus 32). Moses intercedes with God, and God changes His mind.

“Our Lord, you used your mighty power to bring these people out of Egypt. Now don’t become angry and destroy them. If you do, the Egyptians will say that you brought your people out here into the mountains just to get rid of them. Please don’t be angry with your people. Don’t destroy them!”

I recently read an article pointing out that in a similar situation Noah failed to advocate for the people who were going to be destroyed.

As the story begins, the human race is living without law, and as a result is living violently and badly. But there was one righteous man, Noah. God tells Noah to build an ark because He is going to wipe out the rest of humanity with a great deluge.

What does Noah say when he hears this? Nothing. Abraham protested to God when the city of Sodom was under threat of destruction. Moses protested when God was going to harm the Israelites. But Noah is silent. He doesn’t try to save his neighbours or argue with his God.

Noah did what he was told. He built the ark and took animals, two of every kind into the ark.

...

Rabbis and scholars have often judged Noah harshly for this. “He is incurious, he does not know and does not care what happens to others,” Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes. “He suffers from the incapacity to speak meaningfully to God or to his fellow human beings.”

“Noah was righteous but not a leader,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes. A leader takes responsibility for those around him and at least tries to save the world, even if people are too wicked to actually listen. Moral integrity demands positive action against evil. Noah, by contrast, opts to withdraw from the corrupt world, in order to remain untainted.¹

Advocacy is a challenge to authority

When King David commits adultery with Bathsheba and organises for her husband Uriah to be killed in battle, the prophet Nathan is sent to challenge him with what he has done (2 Samuel 12). He does it by telling David the story of a poor man whose pet lamb was taken by a rich neighbour. He gets David’s sympathy, and then turns the story to what David himself has done. “Then Nathan told David: You are that rich man! Now listen to what the Lord God of Israel says to you...”

Authority does not like to be challenged, and may respond in very negative ways

David responds with repentance. By contrast, when queen Jezebel has Naboth killed, so that king Ahab can acquire Naboth’s vineyard, God says to Elijah “Go tell him that I say, ‘Ahab, you

¹ David Brooks “[Harvey, Irma, Jose ... and Noah](#)” New York Times 12 September 2017



murdered Naboth and took his property” (1 Kings 21). Elijah’s words were a challenge to Ahab, and a promise of punishment. Ahab pretends to repent, but actually his life does not change.

Any challenge to authority carries with it a measure of danger. Authority does not like to be challenged, and may respond in very negative ways. As we go into any advocacy situation we must have our eyes open to understand and weigh up those potential dangers.

The story of Esther is an example. When Haman has plotted to have the Jews destroyed she is the only one who has the opportunity to go before the King and ask for her people to be saved. She knows that she is risking her life to do this. “There is a law about going in to see the king, and all his officials and his people know about this law. Anyone who goes in to see the king without being invited by him will be put to death.” (Esther 4:11) She is aware of the danger, and so she goes about the task with a great deal of care and preparation.

Jesus and the Holy Spirit are advocates

An ‘Advocate’ is someone who stands beside you and speaks on your behalf. In some countries an advocate is another name for a lawyer. Advocacy is the act of advocating: acting, speaking or writing in support (of something).

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One of the names for the Holy Spirit is the “Advocate”. In John 14 Jesus says “If you love me, you will do as I command. Then I will ask the Father to send you the Holy Spirit who will **help** you and always be with you. The Spirit will show you what is true.” The Greek work here translated as “help” can also be translated as “comfort,” “encourage,” or “defend,” which are all advocacy terms.

Jesus is our Advocate with God: “But if you do sin, Jesus Christ always does the right thing, and he will speak to the Father for us”. 1 John 2:1

Advocacy “for”, “with”, or “by”

In the above examples, Abraham is advocating “for” the city of Sodom. He is outside. He is not a resident of Sodom. His nephew Lot is there, but he doesn’t just say to God “save my nephew Lot”. He is interceding for the whole city, for people who are not his own. He is advocating across social, ethnic and religious divisions, and talking simply about justice – “are you also going to destroy those who are good? ... You are the judge of all the earth, and you do what is right.”

The best advocacy is that which enables a community to find their own voice, and to speak on their own behalf

Moses is leading the people of Israel. He is one of them, but he is given the chance to stand aside. God will save him, but destroy all the rest of the people. He rejects that opportunity, and stands with his people.

Esther is pleading for her people, but she doesn’t try to do it on her own. She asks for all her people to support her: “Bring together all the Jews in Susa and tell them to go without eating for my sake! Don’t eat or drink for three days and nights. My servant girls and I will do the same. Then I will go in to see the king, even if it means I must die.”

There are situations for each of those kinds of response. There are circumstances where individual leadership may be required, and may be the quickest and best response. However in community development terms, the involvement of the whole community is the strongest response, and the



one that we should seek to build. The best advocacy is that which enables a community to find their own voice, and to speak on their own behalf.

Dangers of Advocacy

Advocacy is a challenge to those in power, and can result in opposition and sanctions. Even in democratic countries government officials who feel their decisions and authority are challenged by advocacy work may respond by cutting services or funding. Where a country has a situation of political oppression those who take part in advocacy work are vulnerable to persecution and personal attacks. This is particularly true where Christians are a religious minority and already in a situation of vulnerability. There are times when advocacy may require considerable courage.

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Those considering advocacy work need to do so having fully assessed the dangers, and considering the best ways to approach the issues.

Discussion

Below are three different scenarios where advocacy may be required. I am sure that each of you can quote a real experience that fits each of these scenarios:

1. Advocacy on behalf of an individual or family. Consider a situation in a community that you know of, where an individual or family are facing a particular situation of injustice. The injustice may be coming from government officials, or it may be coming from a powerful individual or group in the community. Does it make a difference if the people involved are members of the Christian community?
2. The second is around a community issue. Consider a situation where it is not a single person or family that is facing this problem, but that the same issues apply to a wider group (a whole village, a slum area of a city, or some particular class or category of people). Again, does it make a difference if the people involved are members of the Christian community, or around an issue for non-believers who are our neighbours?
3. The third is where the justice issue that needs to be addressed is within our own church community. Consider a situation within the Christian community, where an individual or group can be seen to be being treated unjustly, or are being blocked from participating in the life of the Church. What difference does it make to our advocacy when it is within our own community?

Discuss each of these situations. Try to think of specific examples and discuss how we as followers of Christ should be responding. For each scenario there are six areas that need to be thought through in considering how best to respond:

- **NEED:** who are the people affected (individual, family, community)
- **VALUES:** what are the values that are most important in this situation
- **GOALS:** what do we want to achieve by this advocacy
- **ALLIES & TARGETS:** who can we work with to help us achieve our goals in this situation; who are the people in power, that need to be influenced in order to see a change in this situation
- **PLAN/STRATEGY:** what is the best way to respond (an individual leader from the Church, a decision of the whole church, helping the affected person or group to make their own response), that is most likely to achieve our desired result
- **RISKS:** what are potential negative impacts from any advocacy



Advocacy is a set of hands-on technical skills and practices needed to effectively press for change. It is also the foundation of active citizenship, a process through which ordinary people learn to participate in decision making at all levels. Identifying priorities, crafting a strategy, stepping forward, taking action, and achieving results are critical steps to finding one's voice, making oneself heard, and shaping one's future. Experience has shown that when people are empowered with the dignity and confidence to act, a world of possibilities opens up. (From the UNICEF Advocacy Manual <http://www.advocate-for-children.org/>)

Further Resources

Tearfund's Advocacy toolkit is easy to understand and easy to use. It is an introductory and comprehensive guide to the theory and practice of advocacy.

http://tilz.tearfund.org/en/resources/publications/roots/advocacy_toolkit/

Conclusion

“Silence is complicity. There are only two reasons to be silent; one is that you agree with the ugly sins that are fomenting, and the other is that you disagree but you're a coward.”

We must always:

Be uncomfortable amidst injustice;
Disquiet in the face of wrongs; and
Disturbed as unfairness persists.

We must never allow bigotry to be easy; or hate to normalize

We must remain defiant

We must resist.

More dangerous than hate is apathy

More dangerous than bigotry is silence

And more dangerous than injustice is the acquiescence to it.

Let us be resolved:

To be vigilant in the defence of others;

To be restless in pursuit of justice;

And let us never grow weary in the work of love

[Cory Booker November 23, 2016](#)

