



NSW.ACT

Advocacy – Determining

What to Advocate

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(Elizabeth looked at the reasons for the church being involved in advocacy. My paper will look at the basis and content of policy advocacy. What resources can we draw on in determining what is wrong and what needs to be done? Jon will look at how, having understood the issues, we might act as advocates.)

What is advocacy?

Advocacy is about supporting or speaking in favour of a cause or policy. The advocacy role of community service and social justice agencies is about speaking in favour of the cause of others. It is about acting with or on behalf of others. Sometimes it is about acting on behalf of an individual or small group within to ensure that already established policy or law is honoured. My focus will be on advocacy for change in policy.

That is, advocacy is NOT about expressing one's own opinion, or even the opinion of one's Board or Management Committee. To express what is merely our own opinion, or that of our Board or Committee, is to reduce ourselves to a self-interested lobby group.

Secondly, advocacy is about furthering a cause. It is not about doing interesting research, producing elegant conference papers, or holding profound discussions. It is about effecting change for the benefit of those who currently experience injustice. Its content is policy, but the essence is action.

How do we move from an awareness of injustice to an understanding of the changes that are necessary? How do we know **what** we should advocate?

Taking seriously the people on whose behalf we advocate

The Catholic Social Teaching talks about "God's preferential option for the poor". The world-wide conference of Anglican bishops- the Lambeth Conference - in 1988 talked about how in times of social change and social stress, "the voice from the depths must sometimes be heard as the voice of God". The Uniting Church national Social Justice Committee and network tend to talk about "solidarity" with the poor.

Whatever term we use, each of these traditions emphasises the importance of valuing the insights of those who are poor, in need, marginalised, or victims of injustice or human rights abuses. It is the Christian understanding that advocacy is a form of incarnational ministry which begins with identification with the situation and experience of those on whose behalf we advocate. Often that experience is very different from our own. As God entered into human life in Jesus Christ, so we must in some way identify with the life of the poor.

The first step in advocacy is to come to grips with realities that are different from our own.

In the UCA, we have been learning to do this. On Aboriginal issues, we are required to consult with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. We draw also on the insights of other Aboriginal and Islander organisations, such as land councils, ATSIC, and the Social Justice Commissioner.

People who have disabilities have their own views of their needs and how they can be met. Women no longer accept men advocating on their behalf. Single parents

have formed organisations to advocate on their own behalf, because too often issues are examined only from the viewpoint of two parent families.

And so on. We need to listen and to learn. Advocacy requires humility, and willingness not only to learn, but also to rethink one's perceptions of the world and how it works.

We cannot experience every situation for ourselves. What we can do is identify those parts of our own experience that resonate with the experience of others, and use that to help us explore their situation. We should not substitute our own experience for that of others. Rather our own experience can provide some clues or signposts to help us recognise some of the significant events and experiences of another. As we test these out, we can then discover where the experiences differ.

For example, I have a physical disability. This does not mean that I understand all the experiences of other people with disabilities. My experience gives me some starting points - the most important of which is the recognition that just as I need to define my own experience of disability and injustice, so other people need to define their experience, not have me impose mine on them. Many of us who are women have experienced being marginalised in patriarchal society. This can provide clues as to the experience of people who are marginalised or disadvantaged for other reasons - race, language, religion, poverty, class, sexual orientation, etc. The experience of Indigenous women is very different to the experience of white women, but our analysis of our situation can help us develop useful tools for understanding theirs, like discerning how power structures work to maintain the status quo, or how discourse is shaped to serve particular people and particular values. If we recognise the legitimacy of some of our own pain and anger, this can help us allow other people room to express their pain and anger.

We cannot assume that those on whose behalf we advocate will all agree with one another. Often we pretend they do. But the most obvious example is that Pauline Hanson, while a sole parent herself, does

not understand the experience of most sole parents and lacks apparent empathy with them. Finding an Aboriginal person to support a particular view is not the same as understanding what Aboriginal and Islander peoples and communities want. Solidarity involves recognising the complexity and variety of experiences and viewpoints.

Solidarity is important not only at the point of determining the problem, but also of envisioning change. Victims of injustice may not have the technical skills to develop policy instruments, but they do have aspirations - a sense of what change is necessary. The second step in advocacy is to put our technical knowledge and skills at their service, so that together we can work out the goals of change and the policies that might help society reach those goals.

Taking seriously the fact that we/our agencies are part of the UCA - theological, biblical resources and policy resolutions

Most of us are in some way part of the Uniting Church. I address that context now. One of the dangers of advocacy is that people forget that they are part of a larger organisation, and that there are resources in that organisation on which they can draw. We do not all have to re-invent the wheel. We have many UCA and other church resources on which we can draw.

The first and most obvious is the Biblical tradition. The God in whom we believe is the God of the Exodus and the Song of Mary - the God who challenges unjust rulers, decision-makers and structures.

The second is the Christian tradition. Some people talk as if social justice concerns are some modern, or post-modern, invention. If we were to study the tradition of the Orthodox churches, we would find that they draw on the theologians of the early period of the Christian church. They use those apparently musty theologians as the basis for trenchant criticism of current social and economic trends. Those theologians are part of the heritage of the whole Christian church.

I do not intend to give a history of church social advocacy here. But we need to be aware that the Anglican, Catholic and Uniting traditions (such as the Methodist tradition) of the last hundred years or so offers us riches of Christian reflection on social and economic issues.

There are at least two reasons why these traditions are important. The most important is that this tradition gives us a strong case. Often politicians try to fob off church agencies with the claim that we are not part of the mainstream church. We therefore need to firmly ground what we say, and particularly our reasons for saying it, in the breadth and depth of the church's life, history and belief.

Too often politicians claim to be Christian and to agree with our values, but have reduced those values to superficial slogans shaped by modern commercial interests. The Christian tradition reminds us of the real meaning of the values we espouse, and provides the basis for critique of current distortions.

The third strand of the church's tradition is Uniting Church policy. At Assembly level, we have the Statements to the Nation of 1977 and 1988, and the Invitation to the Nation issued by the Assembly in 1997. Key themes of these are human rights, and the rights of Aboriginal people. The Assembly also has substantial sets of policy principles or middle axioms on issues such as the environment (1991) and unemployment (1994).

The synods of the church also have policy statements. In NSW we have, for example, sets of policy principles about multiculturalism, social justice in society, unemployment, family, and environment. These are based on substantial research and consultation, and provide general directions that can guide our exploration of specific issues and provide the basis for public advocacy. They can be used by any church agency.

The Board for Social Responsibility, for example, used the policy principles adopted by the 1992 NSW Synod as the basis for several submissions to government and published articles while the Keating Government's Committee on Employment Opportunity was doing its work. More recently, the Assembly policy

principles formed the basis for the UCSA's position paper on unemployment.

Taking seriously human rights/citizenship - a third basis of advocacy

Advocacy on social and economic issues can and should be firmly grounded in the Christian tradition. We should be able to give an account, to the church, of how our beliefs guide what we advocate. But in the policy-making context in a pluralistic and secularised society, belief is not enough. In a democracy based on freedom of conscience and belief, we cannot force a purely Christian case or Christian view on society. Politicians would be irresponsible to let us do so.

The Uniting, Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and probably several others, recognise the international human rights instruments as the standard for assessing governments, their policies and their actions. Those instruments are probably the only credible approximation of "natural law", i.e. of morality which is self-evident and universal. We may not demand that government policy conform to our personal theology. We may demand that government policy conform to the international human rights covenants and conventions that Australia has ratified.

It is notable that Australian political debate avoids the question of human rights. Too often people assume that because Australia has in recent decades measured up fairly well on civil and political rights, that is the end of the matter. There are no adequate mechanisms at present, however, for ensuring the economic, social and cultural rights of the Australian people.

Part of the role of the community service agencies and parishes should be advocacy on specific details of policy, such as capital funding for nursing homes or the adequacy of the new job placement network. But part of our role must also be to place those issues in the wider context of economic, social and cultural human rights and the overall shape of society.

Native title is the obvious example. The Howard Government simply ignores the human rights issues involved. At a more fundamental level, the whole "user pays"

concept is a denial of human rights, by making access to essential services dependent on one's ability to pay. Work, education and training, basic health care, housing, income support, increased standard of living as the nation prospers, these are all human rights. Too often advocacy on specific issues diverts our attention from the overall threats to economic, social and cultural rights.

The fourth ingredient - research into what works

Some people in the church assume that solidarity is sufficient basis for good advocacy. Others assume that if we have our Christian belief sorted out, then the nature of good policy will automatically become clear; it can be deduced from Christian belief.

At a different extreme again are those who claim that the church can only talk about theology and ethics, and that it has no expertise in social policy matters. Specific policy should be left to others. If we believed that, we probably would not be in this session.

I am not impressed by any of these views. Good advocacy involves questions of values, which lead to general policy directions (called middle axioms). But good advocacy also requires that church agencies draw on social policy research and debate, using its commitment to human rights and to "the poor" as a lens. The church should not go beyond its experience and expertise where there are others in the policy process who have similar values and are better equipped, but there will be, and have been, situations where the church has specific policy expertise. In those cases, we should use it. An example is the nursing home policy debacle in 1997 - the UCA runs the largest nursing home network in Australia, and it would have been irresponsible to retreat from the debate. A retreat would have sacrificed the needs of frail aged residents of our facilities to a particular theological concept of church. Some church staff knew more about nursing homes than some of the policy development staff in the relevant government department, and certainly more than the relevant minister.

On the other hand, the church does not have particular expertise in taxation. Through its agencies and community service organisations, the church has expertise in how taxation affects the poor, but being able to define the effects of a non-progressive system is a different matter from developing a workable taxation system that can be enshrined in legislation. We need, in this case, to recognise our limits.

It may seem a bit too obvious to say this, but our policy analysis must be impeccable - the best we are able to offer, drawing on the best resources available to us. If we comment on a policy, we should make sure we understand how it works. In discussing taxation, for example, we should ensure that we understand the system well enough to distinguish those monies for which the Australian Taxation Office acts as agent, such as child support payments and the superannuation guarantee, from those monies which are revenue for government, such as income tax, excise, etc. We do not help people understand taxation issues if we atomise the various components of the income tax system that have developed as mechanisms to ensure its integrity as if they are quite separate forms of revenue (income tax, withholding tax, fringe benefit tax, capital gains tax). At least one church paper I have seen has been confused about these matters. The Australian taxation office website might not seem spiritually inspiring, but interesting theological debates will never tell us how the taxation system actually works.

That is, advocacy needs to draw on our own professional expertise as agencies, and on the policy literature, bringing these into dialogue with the experience of the poor and abused, and with the Christian tradition. We should not fall into the trap of assuming that policy research is value neutral - the questions asked and type of answers sought will depend on the values and ideology assumed by the researcher.

In 1992, for example, in the debate about *Fightback*, my critique drew on the Bible and UCA statements for its overall framework of evaluation, but on the work of Elizabeth Savage, an economist specialising in taxation, for analysis of how the *Fightback* package would work. The Bible tells us the test must be how the

poor fare under policy change. Our knowledge of the experience of the poor tells us that the models used by politicians and academics are often overly simplistic and underestimate the harm some policies cause the poor. But we still need technical expertise to help us understand how a particular policy will work. The trick is to find technical experts who let their models be informed by the values and understanding of society that we share.

Advocacy in the policy making process and in community/church

While the "how" of advocacy will be taken up by the other two speakers, there is one point that I want to make about audience. Who is the target of our advocacy? Some of us, particularly UCSA, work mainly with government and public service - the formal policy making processes. This is an essential part of advocacy for social change.

There are at least two other roles of advocacy that the church must fulfil, without neglecting that first role.

Some churches see the UCA as a bit crass because we actually seek media coverage. They prefer gentlemanly (and I use the term advisedly) discussions over lunch, in private. No one knows exactly what is said or to whom or why. Many of us in the UCA see the media as important for two reasons. First, politicians respond to community feeling. Our direct advocacy in the policy process is stronger if we have also public support. Second, making our views known in the media means we are accountable, both to the church and to the society whose shape we seek to influence. Some media advocacy is an essential supplement to advocacy in the public policy process. I hope that I do not need to add that it is inappropriate to advocate publicly a position that we have not also communicated to the relevant policy makers directly.

Finally, we must advocate within the church. Our work as agencies, organisations and services gives us a view of human experience and policy issues that many church members never have. We discover the limits of idealism and the depth of human need to which policy must

respond in a non-judgmental manner, if people are to survive and society hold together. But as church agencies, we must do our best to carry the church with us - to encourage both trust in our work, and complementary advocacy by parishes and individual church members. We are part of an organism, the body of Christ. We have particular functions in advocacy, but we are also part of a larger organism, from which we have much to learn, and to whom we have much to offer.

May our advocacy work be always guided and empowered by the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, as we follow Christ's example of incarnational mission and solidarity, knowing that as we work for better social policy, God works with us to change attitudes and structures, for the sake of those whose human rights have been denied.

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