

Advocacy: What does it mean for our church?

Submitted by: Gretchen Strohmaier

In February we hosted a panel discussion about the role of advocacy in our church. Here is a summary of what we heard that evening. This is part of an ongoing discussion about how we, the body of Christ, move together in our efforts to serve God and love neighbor.

Bradley Wirth, Priest from All Saints Whitefish, Columbia Falls, shared about the history of advocacy within the Episcopal Church. Notably, the Church never advocated against slavery, he said. In later years there were bishops that took a stand for specific issues. Bradley shared about Bishop Tuttle's work to support education, anti-polygamy and healthcare. He noted that Bishop Paul Jones also advocated for social causes, their stands were often not popular.

ADVOCACY IS A SPIRITUAL GIFT.

identifying Christ with the poor (See Matthew 25--*When you did this to the least of these, you did it to me.*) Bradley was clear that advocacy is a spiritual gift and that not everyone has that gift. He talked about the body of Christ and the differing gifts we bring together to act as one body.

Bradley shared a little about Scripture and what it has to say about advocacy. He delineated three different ways that Scripture frames it: providing materials and supplies, speaking out against injustice, and

Pru Randall talked about the history of advocacy within General Convention. She gave examples from the 1960s, a particularly turbulent time. She described the work of Presiding Bishop, John Hines, and the special convention he called in 1969. Pru read a list of subject areas that General Convention is currently working on, things like: Anglican Communion, Book of Common Prayer, Christian formation, criminal justice, disabled persons, economic justice, ecumenism, education, environment, equality, evangelism,

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human rights, interfaith dialogue, international relations, justice, Native American ministry, poverty, racism, refugees, substance abuse, violence, and war.

As there are many directions advocacy can take, and many worthy causes and needs, Deacon Dorcie Dvarishkis spoke about the series of filters we have that help us narrow our focus. First, the national church serves as a filter. There are many issues that the church as a whole has already identified and is at work on (see Pru Randall's list above). Secondly, our diocese and our bishop serve as a filter to focus our work. Bishop Brookhart, for instance, has devoted special attention to Native American ministries. Our third filter for clarifying our advocacy work is of course the interest, energy and skills of the people within our parish (along with the vision and mission of our church) and the leadership of our vestry. Another filtering resource mentioned was the Montana Association of Christians and their focused legislative work.

Deacon Dorcie Dvarishkis explained the process the church went through last spring as we were assisted by Missoula Interfaith Collaborative (MIC) to discern a new ministry focus area. She detailed the process for interviewing, listening and mapping, and explained that 19 areas of interest were identified within the congregation. Through that process the focus was narrowed to a specific interest in working with at-

risk children, teens and families. Hellgate High School and The Parenting Place were identified as entryways for this work. Currently, research teams are learning about the systems already in place within these settings and the needs those within these settings are already identifying.

Jesse Jaeger described his understanding of faith based justice making. He drew a triangle labeling the top point “advocacy” (systemic change) and the two bottom points, “contemplation” and “service.” He proposed that all three of these elements are important and necessary and that they need to work in concert. Though Bradley noted not every person will have the gifts and call to work in all areas, Jesse encouraged each person to try to engage in all three. Jesse described that in his experience most people of faith do direct service (like working at the foodbank), and do contemplation (personal and Biblical

reflection), but are less comfortable doing advocacy (the legislative work that is required for larger social change).

DIRECT SERVICE, CONTEMPLATION AND ADVOCACY WORK TOGETHER. ALL THREE ARE REQUIRED FOR FAITH BASED JUSTICE MAKING.

Both Bradley and Jesse spoke about the importance of listening to one another, particularly in the current

divisive political climate. Bradley encouraged that real and authentic dialogue about hot topics can begin by asking, (for example) what is your *experience* with guns? By listening to one another’s *stories*, rather than focusing on one another’s *position*, true communication can happen. Jesse noted that we must work towards open communication in this place saying, “If we can’t talk openly here (at church,) where will it happen?”

Bradley closed the panel with a brief description of the Johnson Amendment, stating that churches are not allowed under their 501C3 status to endorse particular candidates. Churches can encourage voting, and advocate on *issues*, but can lose their tax status if they endorse candidates.

Next Steps? A member of the audience asked about where we go from here. Jesse responded that he believes *the vestry needs to chart a course for the process we will use in moving forward on issues of advocacy*. Of course individuals can always educate themselves about positions the national church has taken and get involved. The question for us as a community is which issues of advocacy will we take up as a group? This is a timely issue and one deserving of our considered thought. This panel discussion and the conversations it has inspired will help Reverend Terri and the Vestry as they move forward into this new territory. In the short term, our parish did identify a collective interest area for ministry: at-risk children, teens and families. To get involved in our upcoming Hellgate and Parenting Place ministries, please contact Deacon Dorcie Dvarishkis at dorcied@gmail.com or 239-7655. To learn more about advocacy areas within the church visit:

General Convention: Generalconvention.org

Focusing Our Advocacy

We use these filters to focus our advocacy work and amplify the impact of our ministry:

National Church

Diocese of Montana

HSP’s Vision & Mission

Spiritual gifts, interests and engagement of our members

Diocese: diomontana.org (Native American web page coming soon)

Montana Association of Christians: macmt.org

Missoula Interfaith Collaborative: micmt.org