



FACE . . .

Advocates and Advocacy: Who Are Advocates?

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THERE WAS A TIME—AND NOT TOO MANY YEARS AGO, EITHER—WHEN NOT ONLY did we not know what the noun “advocate” was, but many stumbled a bit in pronouncing the word, mistaking the verb (ad-ve-kAt) for the noun (ad’ve-kit). We are both: advocates (those who plead another’s cause) who advocate (speak or write in support of something).

What then is an advocate? First, advocates are friends. We’ve all been friends. You know the “I get by with a little help from my friends” friends, the “someone whom we know and who knows us and is still fond of us” friends, or even the Society of Friends or Quaker friends.

But a friend is also an ally, a supporter, or a sympathizer. Advocates are allies, supporters, and, yes, sometimes sympathizers with those who are poor, hungry, imprisoned, lonely, sick, or disenfranchised from decision-making circles, and also with the environment, which can only groan its needs, but not write letters about it.

Though often taken out of context and therefore used inappropriately, the phrase “the poor you will always have with you” is true and suggests a whole new circle of friends. Advocates are friends of the poor and the friendless as public policy is set.

Second, advocates are neighbors. There is the “one who lives near me” neighbor, there are the “people who live in my neighborhood” neighbors, and there is the “love your neighbor as yourself” neighbor.

The familiar parable of the good Samaritan challenges our definition of neighbor. When a lawyer asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus points to the written law, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” But the lawyer asks, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus’ response, the parable of the good Samaritan, is rich for advocacy. It not only raises the importance of direct emergency service, which is critical in the full cycle of justice, but implies, for us at least, the need for advocates to address the needs of safety on the road or the racism and classism that delayed prompt care.

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TO FACE

Advocates and Advocacy: Why Do We Advocate?

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A CENTURY AGO LUTHERAN THINKING IN THE UNITED STATES ON CHURCH AND state relations had no room for advocacy. The article on “Church and State” in *The Lutheran Cyclopedia* (1899) illustrates a widespread attitude. The proper relationship is “total separation of Church and State, neither demanding or exercising any direct influence upon the government of the other, as was the case in the first centuries of the Church and now is in our United States.” Luther, claims the article, agreed with this principle.

G. T. Lee, editor of the *Lutheran Church Herald*, subtitles his 1927 book *Church and State* with the rhetorical question, “Can We Save the Country by Legislation?” He sees efforts by denominational and interdenominational groups to mobilize the churches “to interfere” in politics as endangering the principle of separation of church and state. It is a principle, he adds, that is found in the Bible, the *Augsburg Confession*, and the national Constitution.

By mid-century theologians are questioning Lutheran separationism. “I believe that especially Scandinavian Lutherans are unrealistic when they contend for a complete separation of church and state in America,” wrote Conrad Bergendoff in 1946. Since there never has been a Lutheran country where the two “were altogether divorced,” Lutherans continue unconsciously to think “in patterns of one influencing the other.” If in a democracy the source of authority is the people themselves, “how can we speak of a state which is entirely separate from the Church?” Lutherans tend to put “the State out of the Christian sphere of thought and action, and the non-Christian element of society are happy enough to have it so....Why should the State listen, when the Church says it has no right to talk!”

In a 1953 essay, George Forell, Herman Preus, and Jaroslav Pelikan continue the attack on separationism, “a division of human life into two neatly separated spheres, one the sphere of the state, where the church dare not trespass, and the other the sphere of the church, where the state does not trespass.” They consider “absolute separation” to be “a counsel of despair,” since “it ultimately surrenders too much of life to the powers of darkness,” neglecting “the doctrine of creation,

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The parable challenges the lawyer of Jesus' time and all of us to expand our definition of neighbor. "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" "The one who showed him mercy." "Go and do likewise."

Go and do likewise! The question "Who is my neighbor?" needs to be put differently: "To whom am I a neighbor?" To whom today, tomorrow, and throughout any legislative season am I a neighbor? As advocates we are neighbors to many people who may not live near us or in our immediate neighborhood, but are part of God's neighborhood.

Third, advocates are ambassadors. Ambassadors are "the highest ranking diplomatic representatives of one country to another." Ambassadors are similar to missionaries, who are diplomatic representatives from a church sent out to perform a special service or to spread its message, especially in foreign lands.

Several years ago, I was riding in a taxi in the Twin Cities, going to a meeting of the Minnesota state public policy advocacy office. I was not in a particularly chatty mood, but the taxi driver was. "Are you here on business or pleasure?" "Business," I answered. Not satisfied, he asked, "What kind of business?" Assuming that he would not have a context for my title or role in assisting the church to do public policy advocacy, I abbreviated my answer, "I work for the Lutheran church." He paused, then asked, "Are you a missionary?" I paused even longer, then answered, "Yes—not a missionary in a foreign country, but representing the church's commitment in what often feels like a foreign land or country—with governments."

Advocates are ambassadors on behalf of an increasingly "foreign country," the mainline Christian faith, serving as missionaries and diplomatic representatives with other increasingly estranged institutions, our civil governments—all this without the elegant embassies for our residence, special license plates, security clearances, and staff at our beck and call. But, the task is every bit as challenging and demanding. It is a full-time assignment, but we need no Senate confirmation for our appointment; that happened at our baptism.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's constitution (ELCA 4.03n) states that "this church shall...[work] with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining institutional separation of church and state in a relation of functional interaction." Faith-based public policy advocacy is the church serving as friends, neighbors, and ambassadors, functionally interacting with civil authorities "to further human dignity, freedom, justice, and peace in the world" (ELCA 4.03l). ⊕

that God is Creator and Lord of both church and state and that his will is law in both realms.”

Drawing upon a revised understanding of God’s twofold rule through law and gospel, these and other theologians prepared the way for a major shift in Lutheran thinking on church and state. Social statements from the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America in the 1960s represent the decisive turning point and set forth a new perspective that continues to guide Lutherans at the end of the century. In moving beyond separationism, they reaffirm the Lutheran and constitutional view that the state is not to rule the church nor the church to rule the state. They insist on a two-prong approach, speaking of “separation” to highlight the God-given integrity of church and state and of “interrelation” or “interaction” to underscore shared responsibilities in areas of mutual endeavor. The shorthand formula that came to prevail—and was incorporated into the ELCA Constitution—is “institutional separation and functional interaction.”

This perspective provides room, indeed, calls for advocacy. (Advocacy here refers to that activity by which a church body through its structures seeks in a direct and intentional way to influence public policy on the basis of its theological and ethical convictions.) It is one way the church carries out its callings to hold government accountable to God’s law and to serve people who are poor or in need. As part of the church’s mission, advocacy belongs to “the free exercise” of religion. The First Amendment, it came to be seen, does not prohibit churches from addressing government but restricts government from interfering in matters religious.

Numerous other factors help account for Lutheran advocacy. Sociological and organizational changes in Lutheranism, the ecumenical movement, historical events like World War II and the civil rights movement, the expansion of government, and the growing pluralism of society are examples. These, however, should not obscure the importance for advocacy of changes in Lutheran thinking on church and state relations.

This Lutheran perspective differs both from those who claim religion is a private matter and from those who collapse the difference between communities formed by baptism and by citizenship. It distances itself from those who disavow responsibility for government as well as from those who believe legislation can save us or who confuse civil righteousness with Christ’s righteousness.

This perspective recognizes that advocacy depends on and follows from the ministry of word and sacrament and should serve to strengthen the citizenship vocation of Christians. It knows advocacy’s judgments stand under God’s judgment. It expects advocacy to speak when authorized by the church, to avoid becoming captive to any ideology or party, to act with wisdom and competence, and to challenge our indifference to suffering and injustice. It calls us to ongoing deliberation on how, when, how much, and for what we should advocate.

That we in our advocacy often fall short drives us again and again to rely anew on Christ’s mercy and forgiveness. ⊕