robbdavis: Advocacy Book:Advocacy Part II: Definitions

Definitions of Advocacy

Before reviewing Yoder's *The Christian Witness to the State* to extract some useful principles for advocacy done "Christianly" I would like to provide a working definition--or perhaps elements of a definition to be used throughout this series. Experience has shown me that many students enter the course on advocacy with a vague notion that advocacy is signing petitions (typically online these days), writing to elected officials (also, typically, online) or "protesting", speaking out publicly around "issues" of concern to various groups. By the end of the course their vision of what advocacy is and how they might engage it has almost always been altered--enlarged but honed, broadened but more connected to their gifts. Part of what they learn is that the notion of advocacy is quite broad but that those involved in it share certain views about what it is for--if not about how it should be carried out.

Standard texts and manuals on advocacy provide the following definitions of advocacy:

> Seeking <u>with</u>, and <u>on behalf of</u>, the poor to address <u>underlying causes</u> of poverty, bring justice and support good development through influencing the <u>policies</u> and <u>practices</u> of the <u>powerful</u>." (Gordon, 2002: 29)

> Advocacy is the pursuit of <u>influencing outcomes</u> ... that directly affect people's lives ... Advocacy consists of <u>organized</u> efforts and actions – based on the reality of 'what is ... ' (T)o influence public <u>attitudes</u>, and to enact and <u>implement laws</u> and <u>public policies</u> so that visions of 'what should be' in a <u>just</u>, decent society become a reality. (Cohen et al., 2001: 7–8)

> Citizen-centered advocacy is an <u>organized political process</u> that involves the coordinated efforts of people to <u>change policies, practices, ideas, and values</u> that perpetuate <u>inequality, prejudice and exclusion</u>. (VeneKlasen and Miller, 2007: 23)

I have underlined some terms in the foregoing definitions that merit highlighting. In no particular order I would note the following:

1. Advocacy is done to bring about **change**. Changes sought might be in policies or laws or, less formally, in attitudes. Whatever the case, change of some kind is sought.
2. The change sought has to do with **injustice** within a system that leads to **poverty** and **exclusion**--more generally, human oppression. The injustice is not a theoretical problem but truly affects the lives and opportunities of people.
3. The injustice is an **underlying cause** of poverty (for example) in two senses (at least): a) it may not be seen as a proximate cause of poverty but acts to keep people from accessing the resources needed to move out of poverty (a lack of income is a proximate cause of poverty but an underlying cause might be, for example, a policy that sets the minimum wage too low); and b) it is somehow part of a system that perpetuates the injustice.
4. Because the injustice is part of a system an **organized process** of engaging the problem is required. This is because complex systems are hard to change but also because powerful interests may have reasons--good reasons for them--to keep the system as it is. And this brings us to a "final" key point.
5. The organized process of engaging the problem focuses on those who have the **power** to actually do something about it. As we shall see, this might be not only elected officials but also corporate leaders or larger social groupings who can, collectively, decide to act or live differently. The point is that the actions of these people can make a difference in terms of reducing the injustice.

Given this, let me adapt a definition from one of the class participants that we might use throughout this series:

> *Advocacy is a planned, intentional process of exploring, naming and challenging injustices (the failure, intentional or not, to use power appropriately) embedded in human structures (formal or informal) that constrain human flourishing with the goal of bringing about changes that will enable that flourishing.* (Note: I am focusing only on advocacy on behalf of humans in this series)

Notice that none of the above definitions (nor my suggested "summary" definition) lays out the steps of or the "how to" of advocacy, nor do they provide the details of the role of the "advocate". These things are important and perhaps merit more attention than I will give them here but hopefully some of the case studies I share later on will provide some information on the "how to". I choose not to focus on that much here because the methods of advocacy are varied and limited only by the creativity of those engaged in advocacy. Having said that a I *should* note a few things here concerning approaches to advocacy that I think *do* matter.

First, by its very definition advocacy involves "speaking". It involves communication in some form. Perhaps in its best forms it even involves dialogue--two (at least) groups sitting down and talking and listening to one another's concerns and perspectives. Now, the fact that we are dealing, potentially, with imbalances of power (more on that point in a future section of this series), suggesting that dialogue is possible might seem naive. However, an a priori commitment to seeking dialogue assures that the person engaged in advocacy will not demonize or dehumanize the people to whom s/he is speaking. As we shall see when we review Yoder, a commitment to seeing the person to whom we are suggesting a change or correction as a human being first and foremost may be an important part of making sure our advocacy is done "Christianly".

Second, the above definitions suggest but do not state explicitly that there might be different ways of conceptualizing exactly *who* is doing the advocacy work. Put simply, is the advocacy being done *for, with* or *by* those most affected by the injustice? This is not at all a minor point because answering this question will drive pretty much everything we do and how we do it in relation to advocacy. If we do advocacy *for* another then his/her voice need not be heard directly and s/he need not be present within the advocacy efforts. Obviously if advocacy is done *by* those most affected by an injustice and "outsiders" are playing some role that role will be quite distinct from the role of speaking *for*. I am not going to suggest that one of these approaches to advocacy is more ideal or in some sense better than another. I really do believe that it depends on a whole host of things and that, at times, doing advocacy *for* (in place of) someone else might protect her from harm. Still, being clear on the way we are engaging in advocacy should be clear and we should be honest with ourselves about why we have chosen to do it that way.

The authors quoted above go on to name different types of advocacy but perhaps more important for our purposes in light of what I have just written is this observation by VeneKlasen and Miller: "Diverse advocacy approaches are not just different ways of reaching a similar end. They embody different values, political views, and goals, and thus seek different ends." (VeneKlasen and Miller, 2007: 17) In saying this the authors are pointing out the importance of being clear both about the ends one is seeking and how one goes about engaging in advocacy. These authors--VeneKlasen and Miller--are committed to what they refer to as "citizen-centered" advocacy, which is part of the definition above. They go on the complete the definition by saying: (Citizen-centered advocacy) "strengthens citizens' capacity as decisionmakers and builds more accountable and equitable institutions of power". While I find much in their definition that is attractive and I believe their ends are good ones, I stick to what I said previously that I do not think that this has to be the end of all advocacy efforts nor do I feel that the advocacy *with* implied in their definition is a must in each situation.

To sum up, these definitions point to concepts of speaking out for, with, or on behalf of oppressed people in order to bring about changes in policy that will render their lives 'what they should be'. In itself this does not appear to be controversial but the VeneKlasen quote points to the fact that approaches to advocacy can and do differ and that the differences (for example in terms of for, with or by) represent different values. With this in mind it is important to ask what values and approaches we should, as Christians, embody in our advocacy efforts. In the next part of this series I will suggest some general points by reviewing some elements of Yoder and by examining, briefly, the concept of Christian "identity".

I leave you with a chart borrowed from Gordon (page 24) that analyzes the concept of advocacy for, with and by those most affected by an injustice. I have found this a useful summary of why each type of advocacy might be used, what they imply for the role of someone who is concerned with but perhaps not directly affected by the injustice and some of the advantages and disadvantages of each type.

APPROACH TO ADVOCACY	ADVOCACY *FOR* THOSE AFFECTED BY A SITUATION	ADVOCACY *WITH* THOSE AFFECTED BY A SITUATION	ADVOCACY *BY* THOSE AFFECTED BY A SITUATION
Advocacy work done by	Professionals, NGOs, church leaders	A mixture of professionals, NGOs and local community groups	Local community, workers
Main objectives for intervention	Change in law, policy or practice	Increased access to decision-making Change in law, policy or practice Build advocacy capacity of those affected by situation	Increase in awareness of advocacy possibilities and capacity to do advocacy
Characteristics	Issues often identified by outsiders Usually targeted at official decision-makers	Issues identified by community Shared planning, resources and action Outside organisers mobilise capacity	Issues identified by community Learning by involvement May have significant outside input at start
Advantages	Quick access to decision-makers Good access to information about wider context	Increase access of poor to decision-makers Advocacy skills and capacity developed	Empowering – poor see themselves as agents of change Sustainable Can correct power imbalance
Disadvantages	Could strengthen existing power structures May not increase the capacity of local groups to act	NGO often in control and sets agenda Slower due to need for agreement between all parties	Access to fewer resources and information Risk of revenge Policy change may take longer