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What about Justice?

Toward an Evangelical Perspective on Advocacy in Development

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Abstract

Advocacy work as a part of transformational development is still approached with ambivalence by many in the evangelical community. It is clear, however, that distal causes, rooted in structural sin, contribute greatly to the kind of poverty that development practitioners face, even though articulating the causal mechanisms through which this occurs is difficult. Case studies show that a distinctively Christian engagement with advocacy requires a clear sense of our 'identity' and the construction of an alternative narrative and engagement in symbolic acts, witnessing in this way concerning the sins that require remedy.

Keywords

advocacy, identity, structural sin, symbolic acts, witness

Angelina's Story

At first I do not think any of us in the room recognized the significance of what was happening the day in the spring of 2008 when Angelina Atyam of the 'Concerned Parents Association' of Northern Uganda rose to address the crowd at Eastern Mennonite University's 'Frontiers in Peacebuilding' luncheon. In her gentle and humble way she told a story about how her daughter had been kidnapped by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA); about the bitterness and anger that that event sowed in her heart and the hearts of her local Christian community; and the amazing spiritual awakening that occurred in that community one Sunday morning when, in the process of reciting the Lord's prayer together, they realized – in a collective way – that they could not pray 'forgive us our trespasses' because they had not, in fact, forgiven those who had clearly trespassed against them: the LRA. Going home 'without giving each other the grace', Angelina and the others realized that they needed to forgive if they were to have any hope of finding peace in that devastated land. The Concerned Parents Association grew from

this experience and carried a simple message of forgiveness and a desire for healing.

What made the luncheon event extraordinary (beside the testimony of the work of God in their midst) was that, on that day, as a result of Eastern Mennonite University's (EMU) work in global peacebuilding and the work of a little known network-building advocacy group named the '3D Security Initiative' started by an EMU faculty member, participants in the audience included members of the US military, the US Department of State and several prominent Washington, DC-based think tanks. At one point Angelina faced squarely in their direction and proclaimed, 'Our gun is now prayer. It is a gun you can carry with confidence because it won't hurt anybody. We can take our gun with us even through the checkpoints, because our gun is spiritual'.

In reflecting on that extraordinary event one can note several simple yet powerful elements in Angelina's presentation and EMU's actions that supported it:

- 1 Angelina had a clear sense of her *identity* – she knew exactly who she was and on whose behalf she spoke.
- 2 She had a simple narrative – an *alternative narrative* – about the nature of conflict and how to resolve it.
- 3 This narrative was grounded in a critical *symbolic kingdom act* embodied by the church in Northern Uganda that lent credibility to the narrative and from which the narrative sprang.¹
- 4 The narrative was *spoken as a witness* to representatives of a state in a way that challenged the state's actions and offered an alternative. It was, in fact, a call to discipleship – a call to follow Christ.

In this article we will explore these points as we seek to define what it means for Christian development practitioners (organizations and individuals) to engage in 'advocacy'. Or, as John Howard Yoder stated in his critical work written nearly 45 years ago: 'we shall here attempt to ascertain on what grounds, according to what standards and with what hope of success it is ... not only possible but obligatory that the Christian should witness to the social order in a relevant way' (Yoder, 1964/2002: 8). This 'witness', we will conclude, is a useful way to think about what advocacy means for the development agency.

Evangelicals and Advocacy: Historical and Recent Views and Practice

Before examining the context in which development takes place and the need and opportunity for engaging in advocacy it is important to examine attitudes evangelicals in the USA have had towards political engagement more generally and advocacy in particular. Mark Noll demonstrates that, historically, evangelical engagement in politics has been driven less by critical reflection about the role of state and the Christian's responsibility to challenge it and more by a legacy of 'moral activism, populism, intuition and biblicism' (Noll, 1994: 160).² Indeed he argues that in the early to mid part of the 20th century:

Among evangelicals of all varieties, there was little evidence of any felt need to systematic theoretical reflection, for a theology applied self-consciously to politics, or for critical-historical studies in aid of political theory.

Concern for political involvement was replaced with an almost exclusive focus on personal evangelism and personal piety. Current events evoked interpretations of prophecy instead of either reforming activism or political analysis. (Noll, 1994: 165)

This state of affairs continued into the late 20th century with most evangelical political engagement (first driven by the 'Christian Right' and later by increasing engagement of the 'Christian Left') remaining 'a deeply populist movement' with 'the most visible forms of political reflection ... still ... intuitive – carried on without serious recourse to self-conscious theological construction, systematic moral philosophy, thorough historical analysis, or careful social scientific research' (Noll, 1994: 169).

In the closing chapter of the book, Noll notes that it was not clear in which direction evangelical political action would go. All told, his analysis demonstrates a lack of vision for, and a deep ambivalence about, engagement in politics and, by extension, in advocacy work on the part of the American evangelical churches.

In the more than 10 years since he has written the answer may now be somewhat clearer. With the continued development of movements like Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA), an 'association of Christians seeking to promote Christian engagement, analysis and understanding of major social, cultural and public policy issues' (ESA, 2008) and of evangelical 'think tanks' like the Center for Public Justice (CPJ), an 'independent, non-partisan organization dedicated to public policy research, leadership development, and civic education' (CPJ, 2008), it is clear that evangelicals ARE engaging in thoughtful political reflection and public policy advocacy.

Further, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in a 2004 Policy Document stated:

We know that we must wait for God to bring about the fullness of the kingdom at Christ's return. But in this interim, the Lord calls the church to speak prophetically to society and work for the renewal and reform of its structures ... As Christians engaged in public policy, we must do detailed social, economic, historical, jurisprudential, and political analysis if we are to understand our society and wisely apply our normative vision to political questions. (NAE, 2004)

It would appear that the days of the ad-hoc moral activism, intuition and populism described by Noll have given way to a process of considered involvement in political engagement and advocacy. This trend would seem to represent a way forward for evangelicals. Indeed, emerging agencies like the International Justice Mission (IJM) are engaging in a critique of the past and the *lack* of involvement of evangelicals in the political sphere while simultaneously modeling what such involvement should look like. Thus IJM founder and president Gary Haugen can write:

Over recent years a number of Christian ministries – especially in the development field – have begun to appreciate the problems of oppression and to begin advocacy programmes. Recent examples include efforts to speak to issues of Third World debt, conflict diamonds, sex trafficking,

child soldiers and child labour. These efforts are promising developments that represent a maturing of the evangelical vision.

Yet agencies involved in this new engagement in advocacy have tended to do so at the fairly rarified level of public policy advocacy. They have taken on macro-level issues and sought to mobilize public policy elites to pursue structural policy solutions. There is much that is right about this and, indeed, more should be done ... (including) what we might call 'case advocacy' – the diverse set of tasks that can be pursued to bring rescue and justice for a victim of abuse and oppression. (Haugen, 2003: 7)³

Clearly, there has been a shift in evangelical understandings of the value of political engagement – including advocacy. James Skillen of CPJ acknowledges that disputes between various Christian groups will arise as they engage in advocacy and civic education, but sees this as 'reality' and evidence that Christians are actually working out difficult issues in real life settings. 'Evangelical advocacy' would appear to be meaningful reality in the USA today.

Corporate or Structural Sin: The Context in which 'Development' Takes Place

Given the foregoing, it is reasonable to ask how the development practitioner who is a follower of Jesus might understand her call to engage in advocacy and what advocacy has to do with her work. At a recent conference on Transformational Development held at George Fox University in November 2008,⁴ some practitioners showed ambivalence about engaging in advocacy. They expressed fears that it could detract from the important community-based work to which they had been called and risk having practitioners become enamored with power as they engage leaders in dialogue around the challenges of poverty and underdevelopment.

And yet any 'development' practitioner who has worked at improving maternal and child health, developing critical water and hygiene infrastructure, improving primary education systems, increasing crop yields or the myriad other actions that go into what we call 'community development' knows that there are both proximal and distal causes for the poor health, lack of infrastructure, limited educational opportunities, low food production and the other challenges of 'underdevelopment'. Proximal causes are what development workers seek to remedy in their day-to-day actions. But they are also aware of the systemic – more distal – causes that have led to the status quo. These include everything from local systems of patronage and inequality, to corrupt officials at many levels, to international systems that provide preferential trading opportunities for wealthy country producers at the expense of poorer people.

In reality, both personal and systemic sin lead to the kind of poverty that development practitioners face. Sin leads people to abuse, engage in corrupt acts, and misuse resources in a way that is hurtful to themselves, their families and their communities. At the same time, it is clear that broader structures also constrain people's ability to achieve the potential for which God created them. Evangelicals today largely accept the notion that '(s)in is not only attributable to persons as individuals but also to nonpersonal social structures as well' (Fitch, 2005: 156).⁵ Ron Sider places this understanding in the context of evangelism when he says:

Biblical evangelism calls on people to repent from sin – all sin, not just some privatized list of personal sins. A biblically faithful evangelist will call on people to repent of involvement in unjust social structures in the way that evangelist Charles Finney insisted that converts forsake the social sin of slavery. Racism, sexism, and economic oppression are an affront to God. Therefore simply by doing biblically faithful, evangelistic preaching about sin, the evangelist challenges unjust structures. By paying equal attention to repentance of both personal and social sin, the evangelist already forges a powerful link to social action. (Sider, 1993: 173).

The over one billion people who live on less than two dollars per day live that way not because of their own ineptitude or simply because nature has dealt them a tough hand. In addition to local constraints of many kinds there are systems in place that systematically discriminate against the poor. Many Christian development agencies acknowledge these structures (implicitly or explicitly) by stating that they operate in an environment of 'injustice' and that they must engage in dealing with the causes of poverty by focusing on that injustice (in addition to carrying out works of healing, relief and development).⁶

While development practitioners know that these larger structural sins exist, the fact that they are so large, so 'macro', and so complex in terms of their operation makes it difficult to analyze them and to understand how to deal effectively with them. In the end, agencies may settle for a more basic message about the need to deal with immediate (proximal) causes of poverty without a clear sense of what to do about the larger structural sins. And yet, as Jacques Ellul wrote (presciently) over 60 years ago (long before globalization and its interconnectedness were the reality they are today):

The Christian is in solidarity with others, whether he wants to be or not, and this fact is much more true materially speaking, in the current world than in past civilizations. Isolation is no longer possible – no separateness. The illusion of a Christian life in a convent or hermitage has disappeared. Whether it concerns simple things like transportation, the interdependence of economic institutions or the evolution of democracy, in every way various influences work together to force humans into this solidarity. Thus the Christian cannot call himself 'pure' compared to others, he cannot say he lives outside the sin of the world. *A critical fact of this civilization is that, more and more, sin has become collective and individuals race to participate in it. Everyone lives with the consequences of the failures of all the rest ...* (Ellul, 1948: 19, author's translation, emphasis added)

Thus, according to Ellul, we all participate in the sinful structures that lead to the poverty, oppression and exclusion that our development efforts seek to remedy. This should lead us to ask whether we have any responsibility, as followers of Jesus, to speak or act in ways that bring to light and challenge the sinful structures of which we are a part. This article argues that we do and, while we may at times despair at being able to clearly articulate the causal mechanisms of the structural sin, we can find ways to 'witness' to the state (or the corporation or other social entity that participates in the structures), if we acknowledge and live out our identity in Christ, if we commit to engaging in acts that support our

words and if we make the connections between the outcast with whom we work and those who work within the systems that oppress. This work of advocacy not only complements our community-based work, but also becomes a critical way to engage in a clear proclamation of the already/not yet kingdom of God to the statesperson/corporate leader.

In the next two sections we examine concepts of 'advocacy', and uniquely 'Christian' ways of engaging in it that build on the importance of our 'identity' and what it means to engage in symbolic acts and tell stories – to witness – concerning the sins that require remedy. The next section provides three brief case studies that show how these principles might play out.

Definitions

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

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

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

These authors go on to name different types of advocacy but perhaps more important for our purposes 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)

These definitions point to concepts of speaking out 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 for the Christian development practitioner but the VeneKlasen quote points to the fact that there *are* different approaches to advocacy and that they 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.

Advocacy that is 'Christian' is Grounded in a Clear Sense of Identity

In reviewing Angelina's story we maintained that her clear sense of who she was enabled her to speak with conviction and clarity to powerful actors who influence the lives of many people. A question for the advocate (or agency engaged in advocacy) is 'what is our primary identity'? And how can being clear on that identity influence the way we engage in advocacy? Scripture provides two extremely powerful images of the identity of the follower of Jesus. One might say that these two sides of the same coin constitute our collective identity in Christ. Peter wrote in I Peter 2:9–11:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, *as aliens and strangers in the world*, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. (emphasis added)⁷

The writer to the Hebrews uses the same language and describes our 'spiritual ancestors' in Chapter 11 explicitly in these terms. Paul adds a critical element to this identity in II Corinthians 5 stating that we are ambassadors of reconciliation – ambassadors of Christ.

The verb he uses: *presbeuw* (to ambassador) means to be 'elder' or 'first in rank'. In Paul's time, as now, an ambassador was someone who represented the interests of his or her nation abroad. This ambassadorship moves far beyond merely seeking the reconciliation between human and God. This is made clear in how Paul describes God's 'reconciliation project' in Christ in Colossians 1:13–20:

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and *through Him to reconcile all things to Himself*, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, *whether things on earth or things in heaven*. (emphasis added)

This identity places the follower of Christ in a critical position of being an ambassador of a sovereign carrying out the sovereign's wishes, representing the sovereign's policies, practices and wishes in the nations of this world in which s/he lives. The Colossians passage indicates that God's 'reconciliation project' is nothing less than the great unwinding of the fall – the restoration of the entire created order into a relationship of peace with God.

Again Ellul provides a useful summary of this identity and, in naming the critical reality of the Christian's solidarity with the world, shows how this identity might provide both a rationale for engaging in advocacy and how we might begin to do it.

The first condition of the Christian is a well known reality, but perhaps not sufficiently understood in its total reality: the Christian belongs to two cities. She is in the world, she has a social life. She is a citizen of a nation, she has a place in a family, she has a job and must work to earn money. She lives her life according to the same rules as other men and women and with them. She is of the same natural state and lives in the same condition. Everything she does in the world she must do seriously, because she is in solidarity

with others and cannot neglect the responsibilities of any woman because she is like all the others. BUT, on the other hand, she cannot be totally a part of this world. This world is only ever a provisional 'tent' (I Peter 1:13) in which she is an alien and a traveler (Hebrews 11:13). This whole thing is a provisional situation – even if it is extremely important, because she belongs to another city. Her family tree (her identity) is elsewhere and she receives her thoughts from outside. She has another lord.

... She is an ambassador of this nation on earth, which is to say that she must represent the demands of her lord. She establishes a relationship between the two, BUT she cannot represent or take on the interests of this world: she defends the interests of her lord, like any ambassador who represents and defends the interests of her state. (Ellul, 1948: 46, author's translation)

Thus our solidarity with other humans provides a strong rationale for walking with and speaking out on their behalf: we understand their plight because it is our own. And yet our identity requires us to use our understanding of the human plight to speak and act in a very particular way. We represent the policies, interests and desires of our sovereign. We obey the laws of the nations of our residence but we dare not defend their interests or policies. Instead we speak to the powers of the countries in which we live from the perspective of our sovereign. Space does not permit a full exploration of the implications of our 'alienness' but that piece of our identity is clearly linked to the issue of our solidarity with the suffering of the many aliens – outcasts, homeless, stateless – people of our world.

Yoder, in developing the importance of the Christian witness to the state, describes the reality of this solidarity.

The Christian church is primarily not a ministerial organization or a conference body, but a host of people called laymen in the language of many denominations, whose primary contact with and witness to society is constituted by the fact that they earn their living and raise their families right in the midst of that society. (Yoder, 1964/2002: 20)

To sum up: our role of advocates is grounded first and foremost in our sense of who we are in Christ. Interestingly, a critical piece of that identity would suggest a strong role in advocacy. After all, ambassadors do seek to 'influence outcomes' and achieve policy change that is in the interests of the nations they represent.

Advocacy that is 'Christian', then, would seem to require not only an acknowledgement of our 'solidarity' with the outcast of this world, but also a continual process of discernment as followers of Jesus to learn what should be the content of our advocacy efforts. With this identity in mind, the next section explores some general ways of thinking about how to engage in advocacy – to be faithful 'ambassadors of reconciliation'.

Ways of Engaging in 'Advocacy' as Followers of Jesus: Witness, Symbolic Acts, and Alternative Narrative

For some, the foregoing may seem to 'over-politicize' the message and life of Jesus and the New Testament writers. Within Evangelicalism, in particular, there may be a hesitancy to interpret Paul's words in ways that would suggest political engagement. And yet, as Evangelical New Testament scholar N. T. Wright

points out in studying the life and teaching of Jesus, we must recognize that, 'the kingdom of God was not just about religion and ethics but about eschatology and politics and the theology that holds them all together ...' (Wright, 1999: 73).

John Howard Yoder, in his landmark work *The Politics of Jesus*, assembles an overwhelming amount of evidence to conclude that Jesus' life, work and teaching provide a normative social ethic for his followers that embraces all elements of life – social, political and economic. This brief article cannot explore these points but, as noted earlier, there is a growing sense throughout the church that Christ's teaching and act of going to the cross offer a critique of social, political and economic systems that stand in opposition to God and that his life and sacrifice modeled a different conception of power and authority embodied in sacrifice and service. With this in mind, what might we discern from the life of Christ and the teaching of the Bible that can guide our advocacy work?

Our advocacy must be grounded in the way we live as a community of faith. In other words, our advocacy must be consistent with the lives we live and the actions in which we engage as a community. Agencies of the church that walk with the poor would seem to be well positioned to fulfill this important condition. Indeed, this is the power of engaging in 'grass roots' work with the poor: we learn of the reality of their condition and can speak with integrity about the complexity of the structural forces that keep them poor – the 'root causes'. Yoder provides more specific guidance on how to engage in advocacy (witness) by building on the importance of the 'implicit witness' of the church.

Even when we move beyond the implicit witness which is given by the very example of the church, by their own inner life and for service to the world, and come to speak of particular concerns and criticisms with which she may approach statesmen, the centrality of the church's own experience in this witness should remain clear. This would definitely distinguish the witness of which we here speak from traditional 'lobbying' efforts of church and interchurch agencies.

- 1 The witness to the state must be representative of the church's clear conviction. Legislators and executives have plenty to do with church spokesmen who actually do not speak for their constituencies, and with agencies of government which themselves engineer the artificial public opinion they claim to express ...
- 2 The witness of the church must be consistent with her own behavior. Only if she herself is demonstrably and ethically working on a given problem does the church have a right to speak to others ...
- 3 The church should speak only when she has something to say. There should be no sense of a responsibility to 'cover the field' with a full gamut of statements on every kind of subject that might be of any moral significance. Only such matters as can be clearly identified by the church as presenting a clear moral challenge or abuse can justify their being given more than perfunctory attention. (Yoder, 1964/2002: 21, 22).

Here Yoder lays out a more specific set of criteria to guide the church's witness to the state and at its center is the concept of consistency with the church's behavior. The agency that is not walking with and engaging deeply in an identification with the poor has no basis for witness to the state about structural injustices that keep the poor in poverty. Yoder goes beyond this to begin to suggest some other key points that he develops further. The church, Yoder points out, should not seek to 'cover the field' but rather limit itself to specific issues to which it has something unique to say.

In practice this implies that our advocacy efforts should stay focused fairly narrowly around the issues that we have studied and with which we have direct experience and a fairly nuanced understanding. This points out the critical need to maintain a high commitment to ongoing learning and documentation of the causes and consequences of poverty and oppression with which it has direct contact. The development agency and practitioner must use the tools of research and evaluation not only to assess the implementation and value of programming, but also to work with the poor to enable them to take their complex story to the powerful and seek redress. In this way the 'evaluation' function is seen as a critical means to speaking authentically and rigorously of structural causes of poverty.

Yoder again demonstrates the importance of this by developing further the third point in the earlier extracted quote. In doing so he develops parameters that should guide the work of the advocate (the 'witness'). He writes:

Since we cannot say that God has any 'proper' pattern in mind to which unbelief should conform, the Christian witness to the state will not be guided by an imagined pattern of ideal society such as is involved in traditional conceptions of the 'just state', the 'just war', or 'the due process of law'. An ideal or even a 'proper' society in a fallen world is by definition impossible. The Christian speaks not of how to describe, and then to seek to create the ideal society, but of how the state can best fulfill its responsibilities in a fallen society.

The Christian *witness will therefore always express itself in terms of specific criticisms, addressed to given injustices in a particular time and place, and specific suggestions for improvements to remedy the identified abuse*. This does not mean that if the criticisms were heard and the suggestions put into practice, the Christian would be satisfied; rather, a new and more demanding set of criticisms and suggestions would then follow. There is no level of attainment to which a state could rise, beyond which the Christian critique would have nothing more to ask; such an ideal level would be none other than the kingdom of God. (Yoder, 1964/2002: 32, emphasis added)

It is important to note that Yoder, in developing these points, is placing his counsel within a very high ecclesiology that, as he states elsewhere, sees the church as bearing the inner meaning of history. The church accomplishes God's intent for the world not by bringing about a given social order but rather by coming into existence and embodying in itself the yet to be accomplished kingdom of God.

Yoder's approach is also grounded in the reality of the fall and a strong conviction that there is a proper role for the state in God's plan. However it also builds on the ambassadorial identity presented earlier. Yoder uses the term 'witness', which implies for our purposes that advocacy done Christianly is, in reality, a call to discipleship. Yoder makes it clear that this witness, however, must use language that is accessible to the statesperson in order to call them to change. Thus human rights language and appeals to legal frameworks and policies would all be part of the advocacy language toolkit of the advocate. Advocacy that is Christian can and should rely on a skill set and toolkit common to all advocates: grounding advocacy in quality community development, researching issues carefully, communicating ideas clearly, and studying legal and policy standards rigorously. However, advocacy that is Christian has some clear distinctives:

- 1 The content of its message is consistent with the mission, life and teaching of Jesus: we favor issues that are clearly closest to Christ's concern for the least (see for example Jesus' 'mission' in Luke 4:14–21).
- 2 Its conduct is done with a clear sense of calling by God to embody the Kingdom: we acknowledge a clear *eschatological* hope.
- 3 We do it in the context of a community of faith the establishment of which we understand to be God's purpose for accomplishing God's plan: we have a high *ecclesiology*.
- 4 We do it as witness, recognizing that we are calling people to follow Jesus: we rely on God's Spirit to move in hearts (we have a clearly established *pneumatology*).

We conclude this section by offering a possible way of conceptualizing our role as advocates. N. T. Wright, in describing what Jesus did in his ministry provides a beautiful summary for how we might think about engaging in advocacy. Wright develops the argument that Jesus challenged the symbols of his day (the nation, the Temple, food laws, the Sabbath) by himself engaging in symbolic acts (cleansing the Temple, eating with sinners, healing on the Sabbath, calling people away from family) and then telling 'stories' about what he had done. The acts were a living invitation to the Jews of Jesus' time to participate in a 'new way of being Israel'. The 'stories' were, effectively, the articulation of an alternative narrative offered to people about the meaning of history and their lives within it (Wright, 1999).⁸

According to Wright, our role is to challenge the symbols of our day (power, consumerism, the myth of redemptive violence, individual autonomy, etc.) by engaging in symbolic acts of our own – acts that point to and embody the kingdom of God (living with the poor, meeting basic needs, connecting people, building community), and then telling stories about them – providing an alternate narrative to the powers of this world as we call them to participate in God's great story of the unwinding of the fall.

Let us examine, briefly, a few examples of how Yoder's principles, summarized in this way, might play out in practice.

Cases

The actual venues, forms and approaches to advocacy – even in the context of Yoder's principles – can be quite varied as these three brief cases reveal. They include public policy advocacy, international acts of solidarity and witness to political leaders, which are only a few of the many forms that advocacy can take (recall Gary Haugen and IJM's 'case advocacy' approach as an example of yet another form of faithful witness).

The Canadian Food Grains Bank and Food Aid Policy:

The Canadian Food Grains Bank (CFGB) is a partnership of Christian relief and development agencies concerned with the problem of food security around the world.⁹ In addition to delivering food commodities and raising money to deal with this problem around the world, CFGB engages in advocacy. In the early part of this century they realized that Canadian government policy on food aid required that 90 percent of the value of food aid offered by the government had to be grown in Canada and shipped from there. Recognizing that this was both costly *and* had the potential to depress prices in regions near the receiving areas around the world (hurting local farmers in Southern Africa, for example), CFGB engaged in an extended process of engaging farmers, processors and government officials across Canada in a dialogue about the potential impoverishing effects of

the Canadian policy. As a result the Government of Canada changed its policy to allow for up to 50 percent of food aid to be purchased in local/regional markets.

CFGB engaged in rigorous research, committed to speaking the truth about its findings but also spent time building relationships and community across the entire nation in order to bring about this change. In so doing it achieved a tangible result but, perhaps more importantly, helped a variety of stakeholders to gain a more nuanced understanding of the global connectedness of the poor with the wealthy. Its witness was in naming a policy that kept people poor and its alternative narrative was that farmers in Canada could enter in solidarity with the poor in practical ways.

Justapaz and Days of Prayer for Colombia

Justapaz (Just Peace) is an advocacy organization run by the Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches of Colombia.¹⁰ Justapaz began, around 2004, to document and publish human rights abuses against evangelical church members and leaders around Colombia. The complex set of factors that lead to violence against these people seem almost beyond understanding but Justapaz has used connections in the USA to bring these stories and the vision of the Colombian church to policy makers in Washington, DC by engaging US leaders in dialogue around the various effects of government policies in the region – specifically the USA's 'drug war'.

Justapaz, and the Colombian Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches, are taking a tremendous risk in walking with victims of violence and by engaging the US church in prayer and visits to congressional offices on designated days of prayer and action. They are raising the voice of the poor to those whose policies have direct effects on them. They are presenting an alternative narrative to the discourse about the efficacy of the US drug war, and in so doing are risking their own lives. Their symbolic act is to challenge the received wisdom that a military victory can end the drug problem, by embodying weakness. Further they create community across geographic boundaries by bringing people from Colombia to the USA and providing space to allow these real people to tell their stories to church members *and* congressional leaders.

The Mennonite Central Committee's Meetings with President Ahmedinijad of Iran

Starting in 2006, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) began to arrange annual meetings between Iranian President Ahmedinijad and US-based religious leaders when he came to New York for the UN General Assembly. MCC did this in order to challenge the Iranian President about his views on the holocaust, the existence of the state of Israel and human rights abuses in Iran. However, the group also used the meeting to confess complicity with the abuses of the US government in the overthrow of the elected government of Iran in 1953 (a fact that still represents for Iranians the breaking of the relationship between Americans and Iranians). MCC also used the existence and content of these encounters to participate with other Christian leaders in meetings with congressional leaders to encourage them to seek alternatives to violence in dealing with Iran. Indeed, the meetings were also an opportunity to talk about the need for humility and the seeking and offering of forgiveness for past abuses on both sides.

MCC has engaged in a highly controversial symbolic act by meeting face to face with an 'enemy'. However, both with the Iranian President and then with

congressional leaders it has had the opportunity to tell important 'stories' about God's justice, forgiveness and desire for reconciliation.

Conclusion: And what of 'Results'

These brief examples point out the potential for advocacy that is distinctively Christian. Though not described in detail here, each one ...

- 1 Was carried out by agencies (and individuals within them) that had a *clear sense of their identity* as ambassadors of reconciliation.
- 2 Sought to take a complex situation and engage it with an *alternative narrative* about how things could be.
- 3 Included both engagement in challenging symbols – by *engaging in symbolic acts* of their own – and then telling stories about these acts.
- 4 Was spoken as a *witness* on (1) a specific issue, (2) in a specific situation and (3) addressed to specific states people.

One question remains: 'does this kind of advocacy work?'. In other words, what are the results and how do we measure them? While the CFGB example does point to a tangible result, much work done in advocacy leads to no discernable change (at least in the short run) and may seem to fall on deaf ears as the powerful continue to permit (or even promote) abuses that hurt the poor. As described earlier – the structures of sin in our world are real and represent the actual 'principalities and powers' of which Paul spoke. How then do we think about results or success in advocacy?

There are really two answers to this question. Like any action undertaken by a development agency or institution we must commit ourselves to tracking progress and assessing results. This is less about being able to proclaim success and more about committing ourselves to an ongoing learning process to alter course, adjust our practice and seek novel ways to live 'symbolically'. In addition, if we engage in this process with the poor and oppressed, we have an opportunity to discern with them ways to engage in advocacy that honor their stories while protecting them from unintended consequences of the advocacy work itself (an issue we have not touched on here but a critical one to consider in any advocacy work).

Thus, we should continuously assess progress. At the same time we should acknowledge that our advocacy efforts are grounded in more fundamental concepts that drive us to do it despite any indication of results: first, we do it because of our identity – we *must* do it because of who we are, ambassadors of reconciliation. Second, we do it to engage in calling people to Christ – advocacy is a critical piece of our witness to the good news of the kingdom of God. Thus, no matter the result we are compelled, it would seem, to engage in advocacy.

Advocacy is messy – yielding ambiguous results or none at all, raising additional and confusing questions about the complexity of sinful systems and requiring time and resources. Without a clear sense of who we are we cannot hope to be steadfast in it. And yet it appears we must do just that. As N. T. Wright states in concluding remarks about how we should engage our world – to live and act 'humanly':

Your task is to find the symbolic ways of doing things differently, planting flags in hostile soil, setting up signposts that say there is a different way to be human. And when people are puzzled at what you are doing, find

ways – fresh ways – of telling the story of the return of the human race from its exile, and use stories as your explanation. (Wright, 1999: 186)

The commitment of the 3D Security Initiative, Eastern Mennonite University and the Concerned Parents Association to engage in advocacy came together on that very interesting day in the Spring of 2008 when Angelina Atyam – sure in her identity – planted a flag in front of people with a very different world view. She claimed there *was* a different way of being human – one that humanized perhaps the cruelest rebel group in the world. One built upon the offer of forgiveness and reconciliation. I am sure her listeners were puzzled by her clearly told story of how she and others are living out their faith in powerful ways in the killing fields of Northern Uganda. And in that puzzlement, sparked by her living witness that gave the story great force, lies reason for hope.

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Notes

- 1 Here and elsewhere the concept of 'symbolic' does not imply an act that merely points to a future 'kingdom' reality. Rather it is an act that points to the fulfilled kingdom while fully embodying it in its fullness in the 'now'.
- 2 See more on the importance of analysis using ongoing evaluation of efforts below.
- 3 Haugen is pointing out an important distinction in different ways of engaging in advocacy. As we shall see in the later definitions, the concept of advocacy encompasses a broad array of approaches and tactics. Space does not permit an analysis of

whether certain approaches to advocacy provide a better 'fit' for engaging in advocacy that is Christian but this will be an important debate going forward. The critical point here is that evangelicals are actively engaged in a number of forms of advocacy.

4 See <http://www.fh.org/tdconference>

5 See also Dawn (2001) and Wink (1992).

6 See in particular the mission and values/vision statements of World Vision International, Tearfund and Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC).

7 Scriptural references here and below are from the New American Standard translation.

8 See especially Chapters 3 and 7 in Wright (1999).

9 Including the Christian & Missionary Alliance in Canada, Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, Emergency Relief & Development Overseas (Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada), Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada, World Relief Canada and The Salvation Army.

10 Justapaz works in close collaboration with the broader evangelical church in Colombia.