

Advocacy demonstrates God's love, public policy director says

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FRISCO—Imagine standing on a riverbank looking up at a roaring waterfall, watching as person after person washes over the edge, plunges into the water and drowns. A caring person has two options—pull them out and try to save them one at a time, or climb to the top and figure out why people are falling over the waterfall in the first place.

This hike to the top—searching for the cause and striving for change—is a good analogy for advocacy, said Kathryn Freeman, director of public policy for the [Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission](#).



Advocacy for the poor and vulnerable not only is a biblical mandate, but also can be a tool for bringing people to faith in Christ, said Kathryn Freeman, public policy director for Texas Baptists' Christian Life Commission. (Photo by Robert Rogers / Baylor University)“Advocacy is another way to serve ‘the least of

these,” Freeman said. “It’s one thing to give hungry people food, but if you see the same people coming to your church food pantry month after month, week after week, year after year, there might something larger going on.”

According to its most basic definition, an advocate is “one who pleads the cause of another,” Freeman said. The concept of advocating for others, especially the poor and vulnerable, is found throughout the Bible.

She pointed to Jeremiah 29:7 in the Old Testament: “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” She also cited Deuteronomy 10:18, which says, “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.”

Public implications of private faith

“The scriptures are pretty clear about God’s care and concern for the least of these,” Freeman said. “James 1:27 says true religion is this—to care for orphans and to care for widows. Faith is personal, but your personal relationship should have public implications.”

Advocacy for the poor and downtrodden not only is a biblical mandate, but also can be a tool for bringing people to faith in Christ.

“There are lots of ways to evangelize—share testimony, stand on the street corner, hand out tracts,” Freeman said. “Advocacy is what people would call ‘demonstrative evangelism,’ which is just demonstrating God’s power and love through acts of service and love.”

Advocacy also can serve as a strategy for engaging those who have a desire to transform their communities but have not previously considered the church as a good avenue for such work. Freeman pointed out that many Millennials—often defined as people born between 1981 and 1992—have

abandoned organized religion, citing too much focus on power, money, politics and rules as some of their reasons for disengagement.

According to recent statistics from LifeWay Research, 47 percent of people who do not attend church say social action is “very important” to them. Advocacy, then, can be an important tool to engage the young and unchurched in the work of the body of Christ.

Advocacy also is a good way to build networks across churches. There are problems one church isn’t going to be able to tackle on its own, Freeman said, but by joining others and working together, more can be accomplished.

Begin in your community

So, how can one become an advocate, and where should one start? Freeman advised Christians interested in advocacy to follow Jesus’ example and begin in their own communities.

Ask what issues your community is facing, she urged. What are the barriers and gaps? Where are the vulnerable most at risk for exploitation?

Freeman also encouraged Texas Baptists to choose their causes by thinking about the issues that break both their own hearts and the heart of God. She offered human trafficking as an example.

“We think of women who are forced into sex trafficking, or men and children into labor,” she said. “That’s obviously not God’s will or design for people to live under that circumstance, and maybe you have a heart for women who’ve escaped from that.”

Freeman noted her own advocacy work was sparked by involvement in a teen mentoring ministry during college. Through her relationship with a teenage girl who wanted to be the first in her family to go to college,

Freeman's eyes opened to the inequity in education. So, she and her fellow mentors worked to address these issues with school teachers, counselors and principals.

"Before my mentoring experience, because I was a good student and worked hard and did well in school, I thought that people didn't go to college simply because they didn't want to work hard," she said.

Mentoring changed Freeman's views

"I thought: 'It's on them. They're not doing what they need to do.' Through my experience as a mentor I met someone who was doing everything right—doing everything her teachers asked, listening in class, doing her homework, being respectful and a straight-A student, and still some factors outside of her control were negatively impacting her future."

Freeman also cited best practices for would-be advocates. She recommended "leading with what you know" when having conversations with policymakers at every level. Tell them what you've witnessed in your community firsthand, she suggested.

She urged advocates to focus on policies and people, not personal politics, and to keep in mind solving problems and addressing needs, not winning at all costs, is the goal.