

BIBILICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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A New Organizing Model for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Office of Public Witness:

Young adult participation is essential for a new era of political advocacy

by

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In molding a model for public witness ministry that serves the whole of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I have been confronted with two significant challenges: first, how to show that this ministry does, indeed, serve the whole church, not just a self-selected, affinity group; and second, how to balance the richness of our past with the promise of our future. It is clear to me that outreach to, and service with, young adults is essential to meeting both challenges.

Using Community Organizing as a Political Advocacy Model

I assumed the position of Director of the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness (OPW) in Washington, DC, on May 3, 2010.ⁱ Prior to my arrival, the “Washington Office,” as it was formerly known, underwent a two-year vacancy in leadership.ⁱⁱ During this two-year period, a denominational survey regarding the OPW produced two significant findings. First, many PC(USA) members were not aware that an OPW existed. Second, even fewer PC(USA) members had had any interaction with the Office.

My interview process for the position of Director required me to offer a plan for transforming the historical model utilized during the Office’s sixty-four year history. Drawing on my twenty-five years of pastoral ministry, I presented a plan that outlined a community-organizing model. The plan focused on activism, alliance building, and community development. During my first pastoral call in Greensboro, North Carolina, I used a community-organizing model in collaboration with an African American clergy group called the Pulpit Forum. We advocated for indigent healthcare, tenants’ rights, worker justice, education, and a host of other justice issues impacting the poor. We organized and educated persons living in poverty so that they could serve as agents of their own liberation. Our model followed the basic community-organizing principle “don’t do anything for an individual that he/she can do for him/herself.”ⁱⁱⁱ We believed that people of all religious faiths, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status had a responsibility to contribute to what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., referred to as the “beloved community.”

We recognized that persons living in poverty are often excluded from decision-making processes that determine the framing of their own communities.^{iv} Our aim was to press for the voices of “persons long silenced” to be heard, by imparting the skills necessary (namely, speaking for themselves) to participate as full partners in their communities and the nation.^v We grounded our training in the biblical ethic that love must be at the center of advocacy by, and with, poor people. We believed that the movement of the Holy Spirit would provide an outcome inspired by such a love, which would enable transformation into the beloved community. Liberation could only occur if both the poor and the privileged saw themselves anew. *Speaking Truth in Love to Power* became emblematic both of our ethos and our efforts to confront the barriers that stood in the way of creating the beloved community.

The theme of *Speaking Truth in Love to Power* was a continual theme in our efforts -- my wife’s and mine -- when we organized, chartered and founded, with God’s help, Liberation Community PC(USA) Church in Memphis, Tennessee.^{vi} We organized a ministry that evangelized the poor into membership in the Christian church through the PC(USA). Our ministry at Liberation Community was designed to address the root causes of poverty while sharing the gospel and love of Jesus Christ with persons who were unchurched and living in poverty. Our work required that we learn about the contextual needs of people in poverty—and that our organizing model be flexible enough to meet the particular needs of a particular community.

Reframing Our Focus for a New Era of Justice Advocates

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. (John 14:26)

In John 14:26, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible uses the word “advocate” to describe the Holy Spirit.^{vii} The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) indicates that the word “advocate” comes from two Latin words “ad” and “vocare” meaning “called or summoned to another.” More specifically, the OED continues, “advocate” means, “called or summoned to plead another’s cause in court.” In this text, Jesus reminds us that God sent us an Advocate, One called to plead our case in the court of judgment. The Spirit is an Advocate. Therefore, we, who are filled with the Spirit, are called to a similar task as we work for the coming Kingdom of God. In our discipleship, we stand between humanity’s brokenness and the need for redemption through the lives we lead for Jesus Christ in the world. It must be noted that we do not serve as redemptive voices because of our righteousness. Instead, we serve by God’s grace.

The writer of I John writes “my little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an *advocate* with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (I John 2:1b). The word advocate in this passage comes from the Greek word παρακλήτω (paraklētōs – par-ak-lay-tos) meaning an intercessor or consoler. The writer reminds us of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice, which relieves us of our sin, in order to assist us in living in the light. He

reminds us of the importance of earnestly confessing our sins, which causes God's justice to prevail (I John 1:9).

As we develop another generation of social justice advocates in the OPW, it is imperative that we be creative and faith-focused in our approach. Creativity requires recognizing that this is a new generation of young people. Young adults encounter and are shaped by different issues, emerging crises, and human polarities. Their politics are often contextual. As the world changes, so do the priorities and views of young people regarding faith perspectives in relationship to justice. Consequently, the markers of church involvement and societal engagement must be different.

One example of this shift is the end of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. The civil rights movement is over, and so the strategies for action and vocabulary for discussing problems must change. Our new challenge is shifting from African American and European American relations to a multiracial global expansion of race issues. Today, we are engaged in a plethora of race issues that go beyond past discussions on race. We have moved beyond equal accommodation to the global impact of a multiracial world, in which old categories of race are too limited. This muddying of historic racial categorization in our society skews racial labels, even while global demands for redistributing power continue.

Women's issues represent another shift. While women break domestic and professional boundaries worldwide, questions arise around standards of societal and family life. Dress, ritual, and power, both economic and financial, are ongoing discussions and challenges as we move toward gender justice. Although issues of women's liberation were battle lines in the womanist and feminist movements in the United States, new questions are being raised about their significance in many countries around the world, including the U.S. The melting pot that we claimed the United States to be in the 1960s is rather becoming a bouquet of flowers in which various groups try to express their culture without assimilating into dominant, western cultural models of living.

Other issues are also changing the face of global movements and human interactions. Confronting climate change and other environmental issues is critical to our sustainability as a people across the globe, but fifty years ago, we were not facing a widely acknowledged international, ecological crisis. In addition, human sexuality, including same-sex marriage, is now at the forefront of our nation's struggle toward full inclusion in both church and society. These changes in political dialogue demand that we reframe advocacy in our nation, the world, and in all of the public witness ministries in Washington, DC.

Serving the Church by Serving Its Present and its Future

In the past twenty-one months, I have visited over thirty Presbyteries and two Synods. My visits are leading me to conclude the following:

1. There are Presbyterians in significant numbers who are interested in political advocacy work. They need training to navigate and overcome the confusion created by the present political morass in Washington and across the country.
2. Sessions and pastors are often fearful of raising political issues in congregational life. They view political issues as divisive. Consequently, members are left to form and express their political opinions without the benefit of guidance from their church.
3. Young Adults are looking for a new paradigm for engaging their faith and politics. Many young adults are deterred from engaging congregational life, because many local congregations fail to interpret and contextualize biblical scripture to present day political realities.

All three of my observations call on church leadership to become more intentional about upholding a prophetic witness for ministry. The PC(USA) Office of Public Witness is committed to the prophetic tradition of the Old and New Testaments. We recognize that we are not policy wonks. Our role is to capture the prophetic essence of our mission as a church, by advocating for the social justice policy approved by the General Assembly of the PC(USA). We are often criticized, but the Bible reminds us that God's truth is often difficult for powers and principalities to confront. Abiding faith in Jesus does not falter in the face of falsehood.

Our advocacy for justice on behalf of PC(USA) social justice policy is a daily reminder that God's truth still marches on and confronts governmental powers and those who are elected to serve the people of God. I do not sympathize with pastors who cannot muster the courage to speak biblical truth in response to the contentious politics we encounter across our country today. While they remain silent and retreat in fear, the poor and middle class suffer at the hands of reckless political ideology. Faithful courage is gained by the willingness to resist fear.

The Bible reminds us that "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love" (I John 4:18). The Book of Order, which we so diligently study and cite, reminds us that "the Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ."^{viii} I suggest that congregational leaders need to expand their love beyond the desire for personal security. They must take a risk in the name of Jesus! This will enable the real church to arise from the ashes. More importantly, it will contribute to each person's own quest for salvation.

My third observation leads to a commitment that we have made in the OPW. Over the next twenty-four months, our primary focus will be to recruit, engage in ministry with, and empower youth and young adults. We will train young people to become prophetic advocacy leaders. College campuses, youth groups, conferences, local congregations, alumni meetings, seminaries, theology on tap, or wherever youth and young adults gather: there we will be eager to join them.

Our goal is to pursue their interest in becoming advocates for justice and for the PC(USA). This pursuit will embrace both theology and praxis. Our internship and summer fellowship programs are priorities for our office. In addition, pastors are invited to spend time with us while on sabbatical or study leave, so that they can learn to research, articulate, and advocate for social justice issues in their community, nation, and world. In the Office of Public Witness, we remain committed to hosting groups of all ages as they travel to Washington, DC, desiring to learn and to have hands-on experiences in the city and with advocacy on Capitol Hill.

Two events -- Ecumenical Advocacy Days on March 23-26, 2012,^{ix} and the Compassion, Peace and Justice Training Day on March 23, 2012,^x are great opportunities to begin a journey of learning more about the biblical and policy work of our denomination and other faith organizations.

Conclusion

Our work on behalf of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is focused on assisting the denomination in making the shift toward justice advocacy ministry. We are implementing a model of community organizing for the purpose of casting a net of involvement over the entire denomination. Specifically, we seek to capture the attention and involvement of young people. This will require us to spend time in the places where young people gather while framing justice issues in the context of this generation's experience and interest. To this end, we will focus our work for the next twenty-four months on youth and young adult participation with the OPW.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ The office was renamed in June 2010 to denote the prophetic ministry of the office rather than its location (as denoted in the previous name – Washington Office). Theologians such as Robert McAfee Brown and Robert Franklin used the term public theologian to cite the public nature of prophetic ministry. This phrase was often associated with theologians, pastors and others who appropriate their gospel teachings and activities to advocacy for the poor and disenfranchised. As we reintroduce the PC(USA) OPW, a more prophetic witness for ministry is leading our work to complement our policy advocacy. Thus, the name change reflects our willingness to work with a wide range of persons and institutions. These persons and institutions include, but are not limited to activists, justice

advocates, congregations, governing bodies, and ecumenical/interfaith groups to promote the justice and public policy work approved by the General Assembly of the PC(USA). We intend to lead these efforts with biblical and theological truth while leaning on the historical role of John Calvin's intent to pursue with unrestrained vigor the transformation of elected officials for the purpose of rendering righteous judgments on behalf of God's people and creation.

ⁱⁱ The Reverend Elenora Giddings Ivory served as Director of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Washington Office for nineteen years before resigning in 2008 to work with the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva, Switzerland. A task force was formed to study the work and future of the Washington Office during the two year vacancy. The task force determined that a new model of advocacy was needed in order to address the need for greater denominational (membership) participation with the mission of the Washington Office.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Jeff Kriebel, *Reflecting on Scripture with Community Organizing* (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2011)

^{iv} By using the word "framing" in this instance, I mean the laws, rules, and other determinants which usually result in power distribution and the establishment of acceptable practices in a community.

^v "Persons long silenced" is a phrase taken from the PC(USA) A Brief Statement of Reformed Faith."

^{vi} I served as Organizing Pastor/Evangelist of Liberation Community Church PC(USA). The ministry was chartered on April 11, 1999 by the Presbytery of Memphis (now Presbytery of the Mid-South). The church was the first African American New Church Development in Memphis Presbytery in forty-six years. My wife, Reverend Gail Porter Nelson, served as a Pastor to children and their parents for Liberation Community PC(USA) and was the first Director of the Basics Learning Center, Inc., a 501 3(c) organization affiliated with the ministry. She is now Stated Supply Pastor of Northminster PC(USA) in Washington, DC.

^{vii} In previous Revised Standard translations, the word was translated "Counselor."

^{viii} The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II Book of Order 2009-2011 (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2009) G.0400 Called to Risk and Trust

^{ix} For more information and to register, visit <http://www.advocacydays.org>.

^x For more information and to register, visit <http://www.pcusa.org/washington>.

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