

Advocates and lobbyists

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The centurion's use of the Jewish elders and his friends to approach Jesus on his behalf makes me think about lobbying and advocacy. When, if at all, are these activities an appropriate part of Christian mission and ministry?

Advocacy that is ministry for people in the church most often arises from their hands-on, direct involvement with people in need. My own congregation joined the efforts in our community to provide overnight accommodations for women who live without homes. A group of women were soon spending Saturday evenings and nights in one of our church's rooms while congregational members provided supper and breakfast and kept watch throughout the night. Six other congregations filled in the other nights of the week.

It wasn't long before these volunteers were speaking up in the community for a day center that could help women find work and access resources for health care, food and housing. Some of them found themselves talking to our mayor and contacting state legislators about ways they could use their offices to provide better support for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Many of the diaconates around the world include advocacy as one aspect of their ministry. Generally they understand this as speaking with or on behalf of those whose voices are not being heard. DIAKONIA World Federation—a global, ecumenical organization of diaconal communities and associations, which I used to serve as president—is currently focusing on those caught in human trafficking, especially for sex and cheap labor. While victims of human trafficking are often “invisible,” some diaconal workers work directly with them, helping them get out of the system and

supporting them once they have escaped.

DIAKONIA's advocacy includes educating other deacons and deaconesses about the issues, encouraging them to look for signs of trafficking in their own locales, providing resources for informing others in the church of the human realities of trafficking, and giving tools for speaking to officials in government about ways to curtail trafficking and punish those who promote it.

Advocacy often leads to or includes lobbying—trying to influence policy and legislation. This lobbying, it seems to me, is somewhat different from the lobbying that has a bad reputation these days—special-interest groups promoting their own interests by spending millions of dollars to influence legislators to enact laws (or not).

What is your take on advocacy and lobbying? Are they part of your sense of calling as a Christian? Is your congregation involved in advocacy? Should it be?