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Study guide

Advocacy as witness

A voice for common good

By Robert C. Blezard

The ELCA is committed to being a public church—not only directly assisting the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the imprisoned and other disadvantaged people, but also raising our voices and working to make the world's complex systems of law, economics and social order work to promote the welfare and safety for people and God's creation.

Exercise 1: Your issues

What issues concern your congregation, community, region or state? Copy the following list and ask members of your study group to check off those that are of concern. (You'll discuss them later.) Invite members to add issues if they see fit.

- ___ Good, honest, transparent government.
- ___ Clean environment (air, water, soil).
- ___ Adequate pay/wages for workers.
- ___ Treatment for drug users (not jail).
- ___ Decreasing racial tension.
- ___ Fair and impartial court system.
- ___ Climate change.
- ___ Responsive, fair local law enforcement.
- ___ Voting rights and ballot access.
- ___ Equal rights for LGBTQ people.
- ___ Affordability of medical care.
- ___ The "gap" between rich and poor.
- ___ Redevelopment of distressed neighborhoods.
- ___ Energy use—less fossil fuels, more renewables.
- ___ Environmental protection.
- ___ Availability of medical care.
- ___ Tax reform—everybody pays a fair share.
- ___ Medical care for seniors.
- ___ Sufficient food for all.
- ___ Fair criminal sentencing.
- ___ Affordable housing.
- ___ Decent jobs that pay well.



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- ___ Work environment safety.
- ___ Social Security.
- ___ Quality public education for all.
- ___ Access to responsible credit (not payday loans).
- ___ Prisons—where they are located and how they're run.
- ___ Child safety.
- ___ Veterans' care.
- ___ Access to affordable, quality day care.
- ___ Funding for public schools.
- ___ Adequate worker benefits.
- ___ Treatment of refugees.
- ___ Training/retraining for unemployed workers.
- ___ Re-entry of former prisoners into society.
- ___ Rights of workers to unionize.

Now ask study group members to rank the issues they checked off according to importance, the most important being 1, the second most important being 2 and so on. As a group, share your top five choices. Why did you rank them so? What did members' choices have in common? Any trends emerge?

Continue your discussion with the next top five (numbers 6 to 10). Did any trends emerge? What portrait emerges about the top issues for your study group?

Transitioning to another line of thinking, what can or should Lutherans be saying about these issues? What is your congregation doing to raise awareness and generate conversation about them? What can it do more of?

Education and advocacy are ways that Christians are a “public church”—to engage our society and government to effect positive change. What is your congregation doing? How can it do better?

Exercise 2: Hunger ministry

Many, if not most, of our congregations participate in ministries to help feed the hungry—whether through a local food pantry, a “backpack” feeding program for schoolchildren, a free community meal for neighbors, through ELCA World Hunger or other such ministry. Discuss:

- What feeding ministries does your congregation or synod participate in? Why? Why should we care?
- Why is feeding others a cornerstone ministry for so many Christian churches? What scriptural basis is there?
- Transitioning to another line of thinking, which would help more



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people in the long run: feeding the hungry or working to change the social, legal and economic forces that make people hungry in the first place? Why? Isn't that the aim of advocacy and the public church?

- In seeking to challenge and change perceptions and policies, how does our effort to be a "public church" assist in this?
- How could your congregation get more deeply involved in advocacy and being a public church? Put together a proposal or a list of ideas and give it to your congregation council for action.

Exercise 3: Your ministries, your issues

Perhaps referring to your congregation's annual report for assistance, list all of the outreach and service ministries your church is involved in. It might include feeding programs, clothing drives, school tutoring, English classes, day care, etc.

Next, link each ministry to as many issues in the list in Exercise 1 as may be appropriate. (For instance, a feeding program could be linked not only to sufficient food but also to adequate pay, public education and other issues that affect poverty.)

When done, discuss:

- Are there any ministries your congregation supports that don't have a corresponding issue for which being a "public church" can help address?
- How can advocacy, education and awareness-raising complement service ministries? Why is that important?

Exercise 4: Let justice roll (Amos 5:6-24)

Because the term "justice" is most commonly used in our culture in reference to law enforcement and courts, "biblical justice" can be a hard concept for North Americans to grasp. But examining Amos 5:6-24 can shed some insight. Read the passage and discuss:

- Through Amos, God is pointing out Israel's faults and calling them to repentance. As a nation, what have they done or failed to do?
- Specifically, what have they done to the poor? Why?
- Why does God dislike Israel's worship customs?
- As Amos describes it, what would true repentance look like? Why?
- What parallels do you see from Amos' Israel and our culture? What sins are we guilty of? What would repentance look like for us?



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- In the passage Amos uses the term “justice” three times. Given the context you have explored, what does he mean by justice? Come up with a working definition of biblical justice.
- What would biblical justice mean in 21st-century terms?

Exercise 5: More biblical justice

Continue to explore the issue of biblical justice by reading these passages carefully:

- **Micah 6:6-8:** Justice is mentioned in the same sentence as kindness and walking humbly. What does that imply for the meaning of justice as God (through Micah) intends it? What do you think justice is to God? After one understands justice, how does one “do justice,” as God requires of us in verse 8? What does “require” mean in this context? What does this mean for us 21st-century Lutherans living in North America?
- **Matthew 23:1-36:** In this lengthy passage Jesus condemns the religious leaders of his day. How would you summarize Jesus’ complaints? When Jesus mentions “justice” in verse 23, what is he talking about? What clues into his meaning are available from the context? What is the role of justice in active discipleship?

Based on your examination of the words about justice from Amos (exercise 4), Micah and Jesus, how would you describe biblical justice to someone in a new members’ class? As a study group, come up with a working definition.

Exercise 6: ‘The least of these’

Jesus gives us a glimpse into God’s priorities in the parable of the sheep and goats. Read Matthew 25:31-46 and discuss:

- When will this separation of goats and sheep take place? What is the importance of that occasion? What else do we know about it from the Bible?
- What is the criterion used to distinguish a goat from a sheep? What happens to the goats? To the sheep?
- From this parable, what do you see as God’s priorities? Based on this parable, what should—without question or fail—be on the Christian disciple’s “to do” list? Why? What’s at stake?

Exercise 7: Witness

In the article “Advocacy as witness,” Amy Reumann, director of the ELCA Advocacy Office in Washington, D.C., said: “It is witness to Christ; it is



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where my witness to Christ makes me care for my neighbor.” Discuss:

- When we are advocates, we speak about issues to educate others and work for positive change. Who is the primary beneficiary of our advocacy work—us or our neighbors? Explain.
- How is being an advocate an act of witness to the love of Christ? How is it service to our neighbor?
- What are the risks? What are the rewards? Why and how is this holy work, indeed?

Discussion questions:

- Raising issues, confronting unjust systems and working for change can be controversial. Where and how have you seen controversy arising from church advocacy and education about public issues? What has been the fallout? Why is this so? Is it worth it?
- The late Catholic Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil (1909-1999) was a strong and vocal advocate for the poor and disadvantaged. He summarized the tension that can arise from being outspoken: “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a Communist.” What do you think about his comment? What have you seen or experienced?
- How are education and advocacy over public issues ways to be “witnesses” or to bear witness to the truth?
- Jesus calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Along with direct service and assistance, how is being a public church advocate and educator ways of loving our neighbor? How do direct service and advocacy complement one another?



Community members and city leaders
gathered for a river cleanup of the
watershed. The cleanup was a
River in the City project, a
a collaboration between the
Mission and the City of
Palo Alto.

Advocacy as witness:

A voice for common good

By Charles Austin



In Washington, D.C., Patricia Kisare, ELCA program director for international policy advocacy, meets with members of Congress to present the church's concerns about foreign aid and U.S. food programs in other countries.

Cindy Crane, director of the Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin, meets regularly with the bishops of the six ELCA synods in Wisconsin to discuss state issues needing attention.

And at the U.N. headquarters in New York City, Dennis Frado, director of the Lutheran Office for World Community, talks with ambassadors and national leaders from dozens of countries about hunger, gender justice, refugees and humanitarian crises in troubled parts of the world.

Kisare, Crane and Frado are part of a network of "advocates" working on behalf of the ELCA in addressing social problems, legislation and other matters cited in ELCA social statements.

"Advocacy is witness," said Amy Reumann, director of ELCA Advocacy, Washington, D.C. "It is witness to Christ; it is where my witness to Christ makes me care for my neighbor."

John Johnson, program director for domestic policy in the D.C. office, said the ELCA social statements, the basis for all the church's advocacy efforts, "are wonderful in that they focus on the things the ELCA as a public church says Jesus would care about—the hungry, the stranger, the children, the orphan and widow."

"Public church" is an important phrase for advocacy workers, for it means making the views of the ELCA public and in places where they can make a difference in what happens in society.

ELCA advocacy is a wide-ranging effort, touching on some very local concerns ranging from food pantries for the poor to complex international issues like migration and climate change. The advocacy networks work with government representatives and members of their staffs, with other churches, nonprofit agencies and other civil society groups to bring the concerns of faith into discussions about social policy. And when a solution seems viable and in line with ELCA concerns, church advocates can help it be enacted into law or applied in public policy.

In Wisconsin, Crane conducts workshops for congregations on advocacy, telling them, "We have a history as Christians and as Lutherans in being a public church." In Reformation times, she said Martin Luther and his colleagues sought "economic justice, not just charity, by going to courts, to the marketplace and to princes" to bring the voice of faith into public life.

"You can't address the hunger problem all on your own," Crane said, echoing the words of others involved in advocacy. "We need to work with governments and corporations and others."

Track record for change

Advocacy in the public arena isn't a new thing for Lutherans, who were active in resettling refugees after World War I. Lutheran churches were also leaders in handling refugees during World War II and later in countries where people fled lives in peril because of famine, war or civil unrest.

This long history has meant that Lutherans are known nationally and internationally. In Geneva, Switzerland, advocates at the headquarters of the Lutheran World Federation have ready access to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and work closely with the United Nations on issues relating to refugees and other matters.

Advocates, whether locally or internationally, are people motivated by their faith. Kisare of the ELCA Advocacy office grew up in Tanzania and said interacting with missionaries and church people on various issues helped her learn to love that kind of work. Raised a Mennonite, she said "social justice was a big part of the teaching as I grew up."

Many seek to have an influence on government and other decision-makers when they see local problems in a broader context. That was the case for Sara Lilja, now director of the Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry in New Jersey (LEAMNJ). As a parish pastor and counselor for survivors of domestic violence, "I spent a lot of energy on individual people and individual families," she said.

Then Lilja began to notice a pattern and saw flaws in the social service and judicial system that was failing the people she was counseling. That led her into advocacy and to her new call as head of the New Jersey Synod's Lutheran-Episcopal advocacy program.

Lilja learned, for example, that basic state aid to needy families had "not been increased in 30 years." And she saw that a feeding program near Trenton, N.J., had an "express line" for people who needed to eat quickly because they had to go back to work at a job that didn't pay them enough to purchase adequate food for themselves or their families. "As church, we need to stand alongside these people," she said.



Lutherans traveled from across the U.S. to participate in the 2014 People's Climate March in New York City.



Photo: Courtesy of the Lutheran Office for World Community

Julinda Sipayung, a pastor from North Sumatra, Indonesia, and executive director of the Sopou Damei (harmony place) Women's Crisis Center, points to her country on a globe in Battery Park, Manhattan. Sipayung was a Lutheran delegate invited to attend the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women in March 2016 in New York with the Lutheran Office for World Community.

The Lutheran Office for World Community is located in the U.N. Plaza in New York. It's the Lutheran representation to the United Nations and is a joint ministry of the ELCA and the Lutheran World Federation.





Photo: ELCA Advocacy

Public channels, biblical values

World hunger and poverty in the U.S. and abroad have long been concerns for ELCA advocates, and there has always been concern regarding migration. But some new issues are emerging.

Paul Benz, an ELCA pastor and co-director of the Faith Action Network (FAN), based in Seattle, said that on the federal level child nutrition programs are current concerns. Reform of federal sentencing guidelines that often keep people imprisoned without possibilities for rehabilitation is also an emerging concern. In New Jersey, Lilja said the concerns are racial bias in the criminal justice system and equal pay for women.

The growing industry of “payday loans,” short-term loans extracting high interest from low-income people, worries advocates in Washington and Wisconsin. Also in Wisconsin, Crane is involved in combating human trafficking, which can take the poor and young people into prostitution and involuntary servitude.

Advocacy ministry today is also ecumenical and interreligious, as illustrated by the Lutheran-Episcopal cooperation in New Jersey and Washington state’s FAN. “We lower the ‘Lutheran’ flag,” Benz said, “and raise up a new interfaith flag, a flag that says the family of faith includes our Jewish brothers and sisters, Muslims and others down [across] the religion spectrum.”

Voices of faith have some “standing” in public life, say people with long experience working with government agencies. “We have developed good relationships because we Lutherans are regarded as being extremely thoughtful, that we don’t shoot from the hip—we seek constructive dialogue with public officials and members of their staff,” Reumann said.

Sometimes advocacy is dramatic and very public when rallies and demonstrations are organized around certain issues. But more often it’s quiet and slow, involving months or even years of work with government and social agencies. Reumann said the ELCA helped get the Global Food Security Act, a bill aimed at improving agriculture, water resources and other food-related conditions around the world, through Congress.

Crane said, “Our voice was heard on payday lending.” Her office also helped Republican legislators in Wisconsin pass a bill establishing a telephone hotline to help victims of human trafficking.

In Washington state, Benz said church advocacy was helpful in legislation requiring background checks for those who purchase guns at gun shows.

Church efforts at the United Nations can even open up new opportunities for service around the world, said Frado, who has been in contact with the organization for more than 20 years. His office helps women from around the world meet at the United Nations, and “many doors have opened,” he said.



Photo: Vicki Hanrahan

Lutherans met in Madison, Wis., to participate in a rally regarding human trafficking. The rally was organized by the Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin and Cherish all Children. It included a visit to the capitol building to talk with legislators about funding and better legislation for youth victims of sex trafficking.

Ali Brauner (left) of Cathedral in the Night and Mikka McCracken, director for ELCA World Hunger planning and engagement, met with Rep. Joseph Kennedy during the 2015 Advocacy Convening to discuss the intersection of poverty and climate change.



Photo: Risdon Photography



Youth from St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wis., meet with Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson in Washington, D.C., to discuss federal child nutrition programs and addressing poverty.




Young adult ELCA members at the 2016 Churchwide Assembly and Grace Gathering pose to say #ELCAvotes. This is an initiative to expand the church's role to encourage voter participation and provide faith-based resources on voting.

"It's the first time some of these women have had an opportunity to meet their national government officials," he said. High level officials in some countries then get to know what programs the churches have to deal with, issues such as HIV and AIDS prevention, treatment, care and support, and addressing gender-based violence or health care, and "they may want to replicate the programs or collaborate with the churches," Frado said.

ELCA advocates also say their offices, through education programs and other activities, "provide space" for a variety of people in government to learn about church concerns.

Sometimes Lutheran advocacy touches surprising heights. When Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian Lutheran concerned about the civil war in her country, began to gather women into a peace movement, it was the Lutheran Office for World Community that provided her a U.N. platform. The office helped her and other church groups tell of their work to end the civil war and seek better treatment for women. Years later in 2011, Gbowee was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work, an effort supported at its beginning by Lutheran advocates.

Today, Frado said, "she still often comes to see what we are doing at our briefings." 

For more information on ELCA Advocacy, go to elca.org/advocacy.

Luther and Reformation leaders on advocacy

The Forgotten Luther: Reclaiming the Social-Economic Dimension of the Reformation, edited by Carter Lindberg and Paul Wee (Lutheran University Press, 2016)

Chapters in this book come from theologians who have looked at Reformation-era attitudes toward the "social ministry" and "advocacy" side of church life. They contend that many have missed this aspect of the 16th-century Reformation.

In 1521 the Wittenberg town council passed the first "social welfare ordinance" with Martin Luther's assistance, providing interest-free loans for small businesses, aid to orphans and widows, and health care for the poor, Lindberg said. Luther is known to have said that it is the duty of "the prince," that is, the government, "to help the poor, the orphans and the widows to justice and to further their cause."

Is ELCA advocacy political?

Faith-based advocacy isn't "political" in that it does not attach to a particular party or ideology. Advocates report working with Republicans, Democrats and Independents. "It's not simply bipartisan, it's nonpartisan," said Paul Ostrem, an assistant to the bishop in the Southeastern Iowa Synod and an ELCA advocate.

People can agree on the problem but disagree on solutions. "I talk to very few people who would disagree if you say people do not have enough to eat," Ostrem said. "But individuals may differ in how they address that situation."

ELCA social statements

ELCA social statements, approved by a churchwide assembly after considerable prayer and study, are the basis for the church's advocacy work. The social statements are guides connecting faith and public life, Scripture and issues facing today's world.

ELCA social statements have been prepared on: abortion (1991), church and society (1991), death penalty (1991), peace (1995), economic life (1999), caring for creation (2003), health and health care (2003), education (2007), human sexuality (2009), race, ethnicity and culture (1993), genetics (2011) and criminal justice (2013).

ELCA social statements can be found at elca.org/socialstatements.



Charles Austin is a retired ELCA pastor living in Teaneck, N.J. He has also been a reporter for *The New York Times* and other news organizations.



A Playmobil commemorative Martin Luther at the U.N. in New York. In Reformation times, Luther is known to have brought the voice of faith into the public sphere to advocate for those who needed assistance.



Marquitta Smith and Gerald Mansholt, bishop of the East Central Synod of Wisconsin, meet with Wisconsin Sen. Tammy Baldwin (right) during the 2015 ELCA Advocacy Convening to discuss poverty and climate change.

Witness as a whole church

By Megan Brandsrud

ELCA Advocacy works to connect ELCA members with advocacy initiatives and to provide opportunities for them to give voice to their faith through these initiatives. One such opportunity is the ELCA Advocacy Convening, which takes place in Washington, D.C., every 18 months.


The ELCA Advocacy Convening is a chance for bishops and ELCA members who are leaders in advocacy ministries in their communities to receive briefings from experts on issues of interest; learn about the role of the church in public life; receive training in advocacy skills; and meet with members of Congress and the administration.

Marquitta Smith, a member of Hephatha Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, attended the Advocacy Convening in 2015. When she was growing up, Smith said her family experienced periods of homelessness. One place she always felt at home was at Hephatha, where she got involved in a summer work program for kids that she now supervises.

“We do all types of things to give back to the community like serve lunches, plant flowers and give food to the homeless,” Smith said.

Homelessness is an important issue for Smith, having lived it personally and witnessing it in her community today, which is the poorest zip code in the state of Wisconsin. “My church is involved in a lot of advocacy issues in our community, but homelessness and poverty are on the top of my list.”

Smith was able to talk about homelessness and other issues concerning people in Wisconsin with members of Congress when she attended the ELCA Advocacy Convening.

“It was a dream come true,” said Smith, who is also a member of the ELCA Homeless and Justice Network. “I never thought in a million years I’d get to go to Washington, D.C., and get noticed for the work I was doing. It means the world to me to be able to be a part of this work with my church.” 

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Megan Brandsrud is a content editor for *Living Lutheran*.