

# robbdavis: Advocacy Book: Advocacy Part I: Introduction

## Background to this Series

In the summer of 2007 I started teaching a course on "advocacy and human rights" to graduate students at Eastern University. These students were studying "international development" in an explicitly Christian environment and I structured the course to address not only the conventional definitions of advocacy but also to engage the participants in dialogue about their "identity" as advocates, the "means" and "ends" of their advocacy work, and the reality of the institutions within which their advocacy efforts would be carried out (both the agencies for whom they would work and the various institutions towards whom their advocacy work would be directed). In all honesty, I agreed to teach the course so that I could wrestle with these issues and gain some clarity about the advocacy efforts in which I had been, or desired to be, engaged.

The reality was, I had been involved in international "development" work for over 20 years at that point and I was discouraged by what I saw. While I don't want to get into all the issues with which I was wrestling, I was concerned that all the "grass roots" work in which I had been involved for all those years was being fundamentally thwarted by broader--what I had come to call--systemic constraints. These systemic issues could be as simple as local custom that made it hard for women to participate in decision making about issues of concern to them or their children, to as complex as international trade regimes that simultaneously integrated poor, rural communities in international markets while giving them virtually no power to control the (often devastating) effects that this integration brought to their communities.

Over those years I had started to read and reflect on these issues, not just the technical challenges of trade or family power structures, but also the challenges of power itself, the complexity of technical systems, and the "best ways" to engage powerful interests in addressing the negative effects of policy. By 2007 I was pretty convinced that I could no longer work simply in the area of providing "social services" (microfinance, health education, health infrastructure, etc.) but also had to examine how I might contribute to deeper, more profound, "social change". I began to (rather shrilly I must now admit) tell everyone that agencies involved in international development were failing if they only focused on the former without carving out some space to use what they were learning in "grass roots" (service-focused) programs to engage in "root cause" analysis and advocacy. And yet, quite frankly, I was not sure what advocacy was.

I was especially uncertain about whether there was any particular way to think about it as a professed follower of Jesus who was attempting to integrate his life and teaching into my work. Several years before I started yelling and pounding the table about these things a colleague--and fellow Anabaptist--from Indonesia placed John Howard Yoder's [\*The Christian Witness to the State\*](#) into my hands and said something like: "This is a very important book. I would like you to read it." And so, years before my ranting began, I picked up Yoder and... promptly put him back down. His writing was dense, meandering, and, though I could sense he was saying something important, not at all accessible to me. And then I reflected... and waited, for a book or set of thoughts that could help me define what it might mean for me, as a follower of Jesus, to speak out against the systemic evils (yes, that is how I started and continue to talk about the forces that keep people poor and marginalized) that seemed to "rule the world" in which I had been working.

I picked up Yoder's book again just a year before I was asked to teach the advocacy course and by the time I got around to designing it, I realized that, as challenging as his writing was, I really wanted my students to engage it. In these reflections I will not limit myself to Yoder but I want to use him to help lay a groundwork for thinking about advocacy because of the organizing principles I find in his book and because he was writing from within a tradition that generally would have found the very idea of a "Christian witness to the state" to be anachronistic. The fact that he argued not only that 1) it was possible and 2) even "pacifists" could/should do it and 3) that there was actually a way to think about doing it (though his is NOT a "how-to" manual) made me realize that there might be something of value in working through his arguments--and challenging students to do the same. I should point out that Yoder did not write a book on advocacy. He never used the term and, as we shall see, his ideas were much narrower than the full scope of what advocacy has come to mean. Despite this, he provides useful grist to explore key principles and practices of advocacy I believe.

In this series of reflections I would, therefore, like to use the inspiration provided by Yoder's idea of "witness to the state" as a springboard into the broader questions of what advocacy is, how followers of Jesus might think about it and what are some principles that might guide us in that work. Beyond these basics, which Yoder himself addressed, it will be critical to step back and examine broader questions that I believe should frame our engagement in advocacy. These include:

1. What is the church and what is the state--and what is the relationship between the two? (There are no easy answers here! Especially given that various Christian traditions seem to provide very different answers to these questions.)
2. What are the possibilities and limitations of political engagement and is that what advocacy is?
3. Beyond the state, what other "institutions" should we "witness" to (engage in advocacy to)? Specifically, what about the modern

corporation?

4. In what sense is advocacy an engagement in spiritual warfare--in other words, what does it mean to say that all institutions are "fallen powers"?
5. How do we avoid turning advocacy into just another "technique" carried out by specialists? (My concern here is about buying into our society's unquestioned "technique-focused" approach to dealing with problems that is rarely about "ends" and often ends up, as a result, "objectifying" humans--even those who ostensibly we desire to help.)
6. While avoiding "technique" how might the idea of "engaging in symbolic acts and telling stories" illuminate a path for faithfully engaging in advocacy?
7. What is the most appropriate "level" for us to engage in advocacy (local, national, regional, global)?
8. In what ways can/should we measure "success" in advocacy? Should we even use word "success" and what might it look like?

To do all this I will draw upon (among others) the work of Walter Wink, John Howard Yoder, Jacques Ellul, James Davison Hunter, Sandra Joreman, Ron Sider, David Fitch, Mark Noll, William Stringfellow, Marva Dawn, NT Wright and many others. I am not a scholar but a public health field practitioner who is trying to find a language and approach that can guide my work and the work I have tried to challenge students to do in addressing the systemic sin that dehumanizes people and, I would argue, keeps them from being what God intended them to be.

Well... this is, quite clearly, a big project and I do not expect it to be done quickly. [Part II](#) looks at some basic definitions of advocacy.