

Challenges for the local church in engaging in effective advocacy

There are a number of key factors that affect local churches' willingness to engage in advocacy and their effectiveness in doing so:

1. The political and religious context

Where the country has a history or current reality of political oppression, advocacy is much harder, and those who do it are much more vulnerable to persecution. This is particularly true at local level where local church leaders and members can be easily isolated and persecuted.

Such situations are compounded where the church is also a religious minority, and their status is uncertain or under attack. In such circumstances, the church is not only vulnerable to those in positions of power but also to elements within the wider community who would seek to stir up opposition on religious and cultural grounds. In such contexts it requires Christians of extraordinary courage to speak out, and even then, they may determine that the wrongs being challenged may be lesser than the wrongs that will inevitably result from speaking out.

2. Views of advocacy

Advocacy has in many countries become associated with what is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as the antagonistic and confrontational approaches of some human rights organisations. Whilst such approaches may often be justified, for many, especially in the church, such approaches may be seen to go against values of love and grace, and thus they are put off engagement in advocacy issues.

3. Theological understanding

Theology can be a major hindrance to local church engagement in advocacy. The dualistic theology of many evangelical churches means that there is a reluctance to engage in any form of social action. Even if they do, advocacy is possibly the hardest form of social action to engage with because it involves issues that Christians traditionally feel uncomfortable with: conflict and politics. Christianity, consciously or sub-consciously, was often promoted by Western missionaries in a politically conservative or conformist way that encouraged a narrow understanding of such passages as Romans 13. This influence still carries much weight in evangelical churches in the South today.

4. The low capacity of the local church

Local churches in the South, in reflecting the community of which they are a part, tend to be poor, uneducated and vulnerable to those in positions of power. This means that even where local churches understand the biblical basis for advocacy, they still require a lot of support. Local churches often need guidance and training on what advocacy is and how they can do it and experience shows that such support needs more than a one-off workshop but accompaniment over a year or more.

5. An inability to lobby at national level

Many of the root causes of a community's poverty will be tied up with national and international policies. A local church is in no position to either access policy makers or to influence them if they did. Whilst local level advocacy can make a significant difference at a local level, local churches alone cannot be relied on to bring about change at higher levels. The role of church structures, networks and NGOs is critical in this regard.

6. Compromised positions

The local church, like other group and political structures, can be seen as a source of influence to be targeted and used for their own ends by politicians. In Sierra Leone and Liberia for example, political leaders have tried to divide the church using bribes and patronage in order to prevent the church speaking with a united voice. Some church leaders have accepted government privileges making it difficult for them to speak out.

7. Local church disunity

In many parts of the world, the church at local level can be very divided, making any attempt at providing a united voice very difficult. This has a significant impact on the degree to which local church advocacy can be heard or have any impact.

Additionally, where the church refuses to collaborate with secular bodies who share the same ends, usually on theological grounds, again such advocacy is significantly weakened.

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