

## Advocacy in the Pulpit and in the Classroom

### Case studies

*To tease out the role advocacy plays—or doesn't play—in our vocations, the afternoon session will discuss a set of case studies. These case studies were written by Larry Greenfield, Executive Minister of the American Baptist Churches of Metro Chicago and editor of the magazine of Protestants for the Common Good. At 1:30, please go to the breakout group on your name tag:*

- A: Common Room (1<sup>st</sup> floor)*
- B: Marty Center Library (2<sup>nd</sup> floor)*
- C: Marty Center Seminar Room (2<sup>nd</sup> floor)*
- D: Room 200 (2<sup>nd</sup> floor)*
- E: Lecture Hall (3<sup>rd</sup> floor)*
- F: Room 400 (4<sup>th</sup> floor)*
- G: Room 403 (4<sup>th</sup> floor)*

*Each breakout group will have a facilitator.*

### Case Study 1: Race Far Away and Near at Home

Pastor A receives “alert” communications from the denominational heads of both her national and regional offices about recent racial events in Jena, Louisiana, a town of 3,000 residents of which about 350 are African American. For years there has been a tree at the local high school called the “white tree” with a sign “for white students only.” And, in fact, only white students congregate there. But earlier this year an African American, new to the area, sought and received permission to sit under the “white tree.” The next day three nooses were found hanging from the tree. The principal of the school recommended expulsion for the three white students responsible, but the superintendent of the school district set that punishment aside and instituted instead a three-day suspension. African American students held a sit-in under the tree; the District Attorney counseled them to end the sit-in; if they didn't, he said he could “take away your lives with the stroke of my pen.” The school was shut down and a fire damaged the academic building. An African American student was beaten with a beer bottle by a white student, who was charged with simple battery. But six African American students who challenged the white students were charged with attempted second-degree murder for threatening the white students with tennis shoes. Their bail was set from \$70,000 to \$138,000, and they were expelled from school.

The denominational messages ask Pastor A to write the Governor of Louisiana and the U.S. Department of Justice to intervene and bring justice to Jena. She is also asked to include a litany addressing the matter in next Sunday's worship.

Pastor A has no hesitation in writing the letters requested and including the litany in the worship service. Her majority white church is located in a mixed income but majority white suburb. But she knows that there have been a number of racial incidents at the local high school that have, for the most part, been left unreported by the local media. None of these has been as serious as what

is happening in Jena. But she knows that trouble could escalate if the situation is not addressed. Yet, making a point of the local situation, could itself heighten tensions.

As she prepares for Sunday's worship and the "talk-back" session that is scheduled for afterwards, Pastor A ponders whether and how to take a stand not just on the racial incidents in Jena but also in her own town.

## **Case Study 2: Teachings on the Way to Jerusalem**

It's the spring of Year C in the Lectionary and Pastor B looks ahead to his summer preaching schedule. He observes that beginning in July all of the assigned Gospel texts come after the Transfiguration story, beginning with Luke 9:51: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." When Pastor B looks over each of the texts, he sees that many of them have to do with Jesus' teaching on wealth. That could be dicey in his urban, upper-middle class, all white congregation. Not only is the church blessed with "old wealth" but there are also younger families in which both partners, whether gay or straight, are very entrepreneurial. Unlike too many other congregations in his denomination, his church has no problem reaching and surpassing the adopted budget.

Pastor B ponders how to approach these texts about wealth. One option would be placing them in the context of Jesus' understanding of the coming apocalypse, which would be a means of relativizing the rigor of the Gospel message on accumulation and wealth. But he recognizes that this creates a couple of other issues. First, how will he exercise intellectual integrity about how theologically to address rather than sidestep the whole issue of apocalypticism in the texts? Second, even if he manages to pull off a reinterpreted and theologically acceptable apocalypticism, how can he present this in such a way that the congregation will feel the bite of the challenge Jesus presents to any economic philosophy built on the accumulation of capital and wealth?

Also on Pastor B's mind are national and state debates about a variety of issues, including taxation (e.g., increased income taxes in exchange for property tax relief so that funding for public education and health and human services can be increased), income distribution (significant increases in the minimum wage), and health care reform (including major increases the number of children covered by the government). He wonders if he could exercise moral integrity if he left these political issues out of his sermons about Jesus' teachings as he made his way to Jerusalem.

Are there other ways, along with the sermon, to relate what he is preaching about from the Gospel texts to the current specific state and national issues? How should he prepare the congregation for what is to come during the Sundays of the summer? And how much should he shelter or reveal his own views on these current issues from a Gospel perspective?

### **Case Study 3: Classroom Conflicts**

Professor C's views on war and violence are well known in the community college, where he's taught philosophy and religious studies for the last 32 years, and in the community at large.

Awhile back, in fact, he led an unsuccessful effort to institute a peace studies program at the college, but the administration thought the program would be biased, more practically, wouldn't play well among the working class community the college primarily served. But that decision only increased and intensified Professor C's anti-war activities at the college, in the region, and beyond. He has, however, studiously avoided taking normative positions on what could be considered political topics in the classroom since that time, even though he's remained intent on showing how religious, philosophical, and cultural assumptions operate in contemporary views of war and peace.

Now he is reassessing that non-normative pedagogical position. Continuing revelations about how the current administration maneuvered the nation into the Iraqi war and then carried it out by illegal means, about the undermining of the Constitution in both domestic and foreign policies with the implementation of theories about the "unitary executive" and about the way religious beliefs and groups have played a part in these disturbing developments are causing Professor C to think about shaping his course syllabi, bibliographies, lectures and seminar discussions in ways that he as carefully resisted in the past. Seeing current and recent students enlisting for the war in response to deceptive recruiting tactics and reading the local casualties and fatality reports from Iraq in the newspaper intensifies his pedagogical reassessments.

Professor C knows he's got plenty of professional cover, given his tenure and respect at the college. And he's been teaching long enough to know how he could camouflage the inclusion of his own "biases" into his teaching so hardly anyone, even avid supporters of the war, would object. But he is torn between his deep concerns about the threats not just to our democratic polity but also to the everyday lives of his students, colleagues, and neighbors over against what he understands to be issues of his professorial integrity.

### **Case Study 4: Career Decision**

Instructor D joined the faculty of the church-related small college four years ago. She's appreciated her experience there: in the classroom, with teaching and administrative colleagues, and in the provisions the dean has made to give her time for turning her Ph.D. dissertation into articles that will serve her well in a forthcoming review for tenure.

The college, however, is affiliated with a mainline Christian denomination that has been racked by conflict over the issue of sexual orientation. The topic dominates the agenda every year when the national body meets. And while there hasn't been that kind of conflict in the local judicatory, everyone knows it simmers just below the surface.

At the college, nothing is said overtly by the administration about the issue. In fact, the college has quietly instituted policies that are "open and affirming" of GLBT persons in virtually every

regard. Still, the fact that the institution receives a crucial part of its funding from a combination of denominational sources, both nationally and locally, has subtly discouraged the administration to avoid antagonism from the more religiously and culturally conservative segment of its constituency.

Instructor D's field of study – American religious history generally and, more specifically, the role of dissent in American religious communities – has certainly led her to pay attention to the roots of the current conflict on sexual orientation, but it has not been the focus of her scholarly work in graduate school and recent publications. She includes the topic in one small segment of her introductory course on the history of religions in America.

But a month ago a group of gay and lesbian students met with her to discuss the possibility of her offering an advanced seminar on the history of sexual discrimination in American religions, which would, of course, include the topic of sexual orientation. And she has received an invitation to join an informal working group in the American Society of Church History that will focus on the history and contemporary manifestations of homophobia in American religions. Her decisions on both invitations, she knows, could begin to shape her teaching and scholarly career in promising ways.

Although she is straight, Instructor D is strongly committed to sexual justice. Yet she knows that putting in a proposal for the requested seminar and accepting the invitation to join the working group will be seen not just as a dispassionate scholarly decision but, to some degree, as a commitment to a cause. She has scheduled a meeting with the dean – someone highly respected at both the school and in the denomination – for next month.