

The Actions of an Advocate

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For several years I had the privilege of teaching an English as Second Language class to a group of young mothers connected to our church. Although the primary goal of the class was to teach English through Bible stories, a secondary role I often found myself in as I helped the women navigate living in an unfamiliar (and at times unfriendly) country was that of advocate. As an advocate, I needed to:

Attend: Be willing to listen (attend) not only with your ears, but also with your heart and mind. Sometimes the concern which is expressed verbally isn't really the one which is most urgent. Unless I really attend to the other person, I may be advocating for the wrong thing.

Do: Listening is important, but advocacy must also involve a willingness to do—whether it is speaking out, problem solving, or walking alongside as a person learns how to be her (or his) own advocate.

Value: If I believe the Biblical challenge in Leviticus 19 to love others as myself, then I need to value those for whom I am advocating as persons who are equally deserving of the rights and privileges which I so often take for granted. We are of equal value in Christ's eyes regardless of ethnicity or country of origin. My thoughts and actions need to reflect that.

Open: An advocate is one who is also open—open to accepting and loving others, open to thinking outside the box, and open to finding new ways to advocate when one method of

advocating doesn't work.

Culturally aware: One of the most enjoyable parts about teaching ESL was learning about the moms—their family traditions and their various cultural and religious backgrounds. Understanding their cultures (and their roles within their cultures and families) helped me know how to be a more effective advocate for each one of them.

Approachable: Another way I saw my role as advocate develop was in a willingness to be approachable. The moms needed to know I would be there for them and listen to them—even though there were many times we miscommunicated!

Trust: In addition to being approachable, an advocate is one who is trustworthy. Developing a relationship built on trust takes time. Although an advocate may want to work quickly, the advocate needs to be willing to take the time to build a trusting relationship.

Empathy: Although I can be an advocate without having empathy, I am more effective when I empathize with those for whom I am advocating. When I empathize, my role as advocate seems much more crucial and my prayer is that God will keep me from indifference to the pain brought on by injustice and racial inequality in our world.

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