



stop the INJUSTICE

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Every Christian in Australia has a God-given responsibility to stand up for justice and mercy. Scott Higgins unpacks what advocacy is all about, what Scripture says and how you and your church can make a tangible difference to our world.

It's difficult to imagine the horror that Nan and An experienced. Their hope of fleeing Pol Pot's murderous regime in Cambodia and finding safety in neighbouring Thailand dissipated when they reached the Thai-Cambodian border. Thai soldiers herded Nan, An and other frightened refugees to the top of a mountain and ordered them to return to Cambodian territory. The valley floor was riddled with landmines. From atop the mountain An and Nan heard the thunder of exploding landmines detonated by the footsteps of refugees sent back before them. Those who refused to follow were shot dead. With the stench of death and fear around them, An and Nan headed toward the valley floor, treading over the corpses of those who had gone before, knowing that the mines in those places had already been detonated. Miraculously they made it through alive.¹

Thousands of Cambodians died this way. The practise ended only when Radio America told the story. An outraged international community pressured the Thai Government to immediately cease the practise, bringing this sad chapter in recent history to a close.

This experience reminds us that our world is filled with stories of injustice and evil, but that it is also filled with stories of people banding together to take the side of the oppressed and win justice for them. In An and Nan's case, the decision by programmers at Radio America to take their side set in chain the events that saw an end to the slaughter.

To this story we can add those of Wilberforce and the end of slavery, Martin Luther King and the US Civil rights movement, Eddie Mabo and native title, the Jubilee debt campaign, "people power" movements that brought down Marcos and the Berlin wall and the anti-sweatshop movement that is bringing improvement in the conditions of third world factory workers. These are all examples of advocacy at work, of ordinary people influencing the powerful to act in ways that benefit the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed.

The Scriptures insist that the first responsibility of governments is to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy." (Proverbs 31.8-9). As believers, we have the responsibility of praying for the authorities as they seek to achieve this and to take them to task when they fail to do so.



This prophetic responsibility to call governments to practise justice and mercy can be fulfilled in “hard” or “soft” ways. **“Hard” approaches emphasise confrontation and denunciation, while “soft” approaches prefer conversation, affirmation of that which is good, and a dialogue about how to move toward justice.** Both approaches can be found within the pages of Scripture. Elijah had a highly confrontational approach with King Ahab (1 Kings 18), whereas the prophet Nathan challenged King David through friendship and respect (2 Samuel 12).

In our Australian context it is arguable that a “soft” approach is best. Scripture encourages us, *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone”* (Romans 12:18). At the same time Scripture recognises that governments can behave in ways that are evil and should be called to repentance where they are acting in unjust or graceless ways. It may be that there are occasions in which governments and corporations have become so evil that a very “hard” approach is justified, but more frequently, a “soft” approach will maintain the balance between affirmation and critique.

There are many opportunities for churches to build a ministry in advocacy. Perhaps the best are those that enable individuals and churches to join in wider movements, for these allow many voices to be heard and render it far more likely that the cry for justice will be listened to by those with power. A range of national issues can be picked up through organisations such as the Australian Christian Lobby, a non-partisan evangelical lobby group, and Get Up, a secular body that focuses on a variety of national issues (though Christians may not necessarily want to participate in all their campaigns). Other organisations, such as the Refugee Council of Australia and Make Indigenous Poverty History offer churches an opportunity to participate in single-issue campaigns. Looking from the national to the global level the Micah Challenge and its secular counterpart, Make Poverty History, are effective campaigns that focus on halving global poverty by 2015.

Another opportunity is a unique advocacy program launched this year by Baptist World Aid Australia. ‘Catalyst’ helps churches develop a small group advocacy ministry in which participating groups focus on learning about, praying and acting on global justice issues, and to do so in a coordinated and strategic way. The program provides a structure by which churches can join in movements such as the Micah Challenge, as well as picking up other local, national and global justice issues.

Scripture not only calls us to advocacy, but history shows it works. The Jubilee 2000 campaign, for example, helped secure \$50 billion in debt relief for poor countries, freeing up monies previously used for debt repayment to be spent on education and health. Looking back on her involvement in the Jubilee campaign, one campaigner said *“I know that I, and thousands of other individuals, have made a difference to the world through my involvement. I can now trust that individuals and their faith and actions count.”*

If you’re interested in being involved in advocacy check out:

catalystonline.org.au
micahchallenge.org.au
acl.org.au
getup.org.au
makepovertyhistory.org.au
ncca.org.au/natsiec/indigenous_poverty
refugeecouncil.org.au

¹ An and Nan’s story is told by their niece, Theory Seng, in *Daughter of the Killing Fields* (Fusion 2005)