

# BEARING TESTIMONY: SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

by Andrew Bolton

**S**peak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

(Proverbs 31:8-9 NRSV)

We are a testimony telling people. We don't recite creeds, instead we tell personal stories of how we have experienced God's love. When I first met church people as a young adult I loved hearing peoples' testimonies of God's reality in their lives. The people I met were so ordinary but authentic and able to tell stories of God's loving reality in their lives. I was moved, touched and grew in faith to the point I wanted to be baptised.

Speaking truth to power on behalf of those who cannot always speak for themselves is an extension of our testimony tradition in Community of Christ. It is the stewardship of citizenship. The first act of justice, is listening the pain, seeing the hurt and suffering. The second act is doing something. This includes speaking respectfully to those who can change things. Moses in his burning bush experience heard the Spirit say this:

"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians... So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:7-8,10)

God saw, heard, came down to deliver the suffering Israelites and said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh." God knows the pain of others then sends us to Pharaoh to say "Let my suffering people go!" All you need is compassion and courage. Noted Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes,

***'Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness.'***

Where does courage come from? The Holy Spirit who calls us! Another word for Holy Spirit is Comforter - from the Latin *com forte* - which means 'with strength'. So the Holy Spirit is present to strengthens us, give us courage. The second source of courage is the support of others. The best way I have found to visit politicians or their staff members is go with someone else, ideally several people, who feel the same was as you do. To go with a victim, and others, gives lots of courage. If you can go with members of other faiths even better. Have

a single issue. Make sure you are well researched, using reputable sources. You organise your roles and practice what each of you is going to say. You introduce yourselves, and do your bit of speaking. You have your well prepared 'ask' - what you want the politician to do. You keep to time. You are civil. You begin by thanking the person you are meeting and mention, if you can, thank the politician for something they have done that you are grateful for. I learnt all this from the Quaker Friends Committee on National Legislation in Washington DC. The Quakers have a history of over 350 years of doing truthful, civil, respectful, organised lobbying. There is much we can learn from them. Our long-term goal is to build respectful relationships and have long term influence.

It is important is to be non-partisan. We are not supporting this or that political party. We are respectfully critical of all politicians when the worth of persons or the sacredness of creation is violated. We are never the tool of politicians or a political party.

Letter writing is another form of advocacy. So are emails, and telephone calls. Why write or contact a politician on an issue of concern? When a politician receives a letter or when you phone they think "A thousand other people also are thinking like this." It is not difficult to do. A good letter includes the following:

1. Be brief. Keep a letter to one page. A handwritten letter is often better than typed or form written or email. But any kind of contact is better than nothing.
2. Be courteous. When possible thank them for something they have done that you approve of. You are heard better and you can begin to build up a respectful relationship.
3. Say what legislation or stand you want your representative to take.
4. Give reasons.
5. Ask a question so that they have to reply. Make sure you include your address.

So, go to 'Pharaoh' and "Courageously challenge cultural, political, and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God" (D&C 163:3b)

