

ADVOCACY PANEL FULL REPORT

(Compiled from notes and recording)

Wesley Cocozello, moderator: We're going to spend the next section talking about advocacy. I work with the Missionary Society of St. Columban in their office of Justice Peace and Ecology. I want to start with two things to lay the groundwork for what we're going to talk about. At our new members meeting yesterday, Don shared the origin story of USCMA as coming out of World War II. Part of the impetus was the state department approaching the bishop's conference and saying, "As we start rebuilding Europe and the rest of the world, missionaries can be a great asset in that project, but they aren't really connected and talking to each other. So USCMA was born out of that and other impulses and I think it's really fitting that Advocacy is part of the new mission statement and this program. I also want to share some reflections from *Evangelii Gaudium*, rooting ourselves in our theological tradition. Pope Francis writes in EG 187-188:

"Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid... Church has realized that the need to heed this plea is itself born of the liberating action of grace within each of us, and thus it is not a question of a mission reserved only to a few..." but for everyone.

The Columbans, we see advocacy as central to our mission, because at the heart of mission is building God's kingdom and so advocacy is a crucial tool for that.

I want to invite our panelists to help us unpack what advocacy means for us as a missionary community and to come up as I call their name

Bruce Compton, Senior Director Global Health for Catholic Health Association of the United States

Mary Beth Iduh, Senior Program Manager for Catholic Engagement, Strengthening Families for Thriving Children, Catholic Relief Services

Deacon Steve Przedpelski, Executive Director, Franciscan Peacemakers

Wesley: The Franciscan Peacemakers are close to my heart and emblematic of the church because they are supported by CCHD, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, so if you've given to your parish collection, you've supported them.

Bruce: CHA is a member association with 600 hospitals, 1500 longterm care facilities, and thousands of clinics, with 8,000 colleague members and 1 in 7 patients. Generally we work to advocate for public policy in the U.S. My role in Global Health has been a little public policy but I do advocacy in other ways by getting members more involved in global health. I advocate and develop relationships with the WHO (World Health Organization) and serve on the faith based communities of practice around strategy, resources, geo-locating. Also, working with a Christian consortium on asset-mapping, advocating that we get counted and recognized for all the work that

we do globally, which is often not counted in those national and domestic numbers. We're working with WHO and USAID on those kind of issues. Finally, I'm part of a group called Advocacy for Global Health Partnerships, which is really working to try and improve global health partnerships. It started as a North American organization and grew to work with global organizations to talk about how we empower our partners appropriately.

Mary Beth: For CRS, advocacy is an essential part of the way we live our mission. Wesley spoke about USCMA with beginnings after World War II. CRS also was born out of World War II in responding to refugees. Through reading the signs of the times over the years, the mission of CRS has changed. Initially it was very much focused on emergency response, and then it went to more poverty alleviation and economic strengthening in the 1980s. Then in the 1990s, an event happened that changed the CRS mission forever.

The Rwandan genocide. We were working very closely and had close relationships with church partners and civil society and never saw it coming. We never saw the genocide coming. At that moment, we said, "Why do we exist? We're in a country, working very closely, a lot of our staff were national staff, and this happened. Should we even exist?" At that moment we decided to have a justice lens underpin the way that we go about our work. Part of that is advocacy. It's getting to the roots of inequalities and why they exist, looking at the roots of injustice. From that, we have now engaged in a dual constituency approach. A big part of that is legislative advocacy. We have seen the impact of constituents here in the United States, the ability, through contacting Members of Congress, raising our voices together with those around the world, being able to help legislation such as the President's Emergency Fund for Aids Relief that started in the early 2000s and has changed the lives of millions of people through funding to prevent HIV as well as to treat and look at a holistic way of helping people.

In the last two or three years, CRS has been involved in campaigns... the current one is around caring for God's Creation so there are some resources and you can snap the QR code as an easy way to be involved. And I'll mention some other ways a little later.

Bruce: Can I just say, their advocacy makes it so easy for us to be involved. I am a person who uses it regularly, and our legislators do respond.

Steve: Franciscan Peacemakers is located in Milwaukee, a 15-20 minute drive from here. We were founded 27 years ago at the request of a captain in the Milwaukee police department who approached two Capuchin priests and said, "I'm tired of arresting women for prostitution, sending them to jail, sending them to prison, there's something going on with these women. We need to understand what that is and do justice by them." A twenty-some year veteran of law enforcement recognizing something that ministers didn't see, psychotherapists didn't see, nobody wanted to see.

The belief was at the time, when we started, that women were making a conscious decision, waking up one day and saying, "I think I want to sell my body." So these two Capuchin priests and myself - I made a six-week commitment back in 1995 - we hit the streets of Milwaukee after the police taught us about the streets where prostitution was happening. We would talk to the women and say how can we help you, we can find you housing, and all this. Out of our first ten contacts, three women said yes. And forgive my language, but after we got them set up in transitional housing and stuff, and we were setting around with some board members, and I said, "Aw, shit, this is easy. Why

has no one figured this out?” It would be three more years before the next woman said yes. And in that three years, I learned to ask a different question.

The question is, “What happened to you? Do you want to share your story?” They trusted us over this three year period because we were coming with lunches and personal care items and forming relationships. I was sharing with Sr. Nancy a little while ago that these women have been my best theology teachers, my best Scripture teachers, my best life coaches. Over 27 years of this work and over 1,000 assessments – and I have to say that my background before I got into this was manufacturing management – and the common denominator that all these and underaged or what are referred to as tender-aged children, what they all have in common, regardless of if they come from poverty or wealth or middle class, regardless of whether they are White, Hispanic, Black, Asian – is the common experience of being sexually abused as a child. And the second common experience, in 85-90% of these women, tell the story of going to moms, dads, teachers, pastors, police at 4 years old, 5 years old, 8 years old, 10 years old, and nobody believed them.

Nobody believed them. And then, to make matters worse, because of the trauma that they endured, and endured for many years, through their childhood or early adolescence, they were told they have to get themselves under control, or this is happening to you because God is punishing for what you allowed Grampa/your stepfather/my boyfriend – whoever – to do to you. And these women, some as young as 10 years old, began using drugs and drinking, and looking for love in this vulnerable state. There are men and a growing number of women who befriend them, offer to take them in, pretend to be their boyfriend, get them to trust them, and through a variety of ways get them into prostitution.

It took five, six, seven years of learning before I and my colleagues, and our board and volunteers, really could understand HOW to advocate. It was first advocating to law enforcement, going back to the police captain, who a lot of people disrespected because they said he was too easy on criminals. But with education that we and other organizations have done with law enforcement, with the health care system, with schools, with the church, things are slowly changing.

Several of our board members are involved in advocacy. In the state of Wisconsin, a tender-age child can be charged with prostitution even though a tender-age child can not consent to having sex. There’s been legislation passed that is slowly correcting that. More has to be done. But more has to also be done to not get these kids into the criminal justice system. I can’t believe I just said that, because it makes no sense to me. That they are taken into care, into places that can give them the benefit of the doubt, in spite of crimes they may have committed because their traffickers are forcing them to steal, to rob, to commit assault, many times under the threat, “If you don’t do this, I’m going to kill your mother, I’m going to kill your niece.”

Many years ago, a 14 year old girl who they asked me to talk to because she was not cooperating with social workers, law enforcement or anybody, and they said, “give it a shot.” And she was angry, and every other word out of her mouth began with an F, and it wasn’t “fun.” After about 15 minutes, I said, “I’m not doing you any good. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I wish there was something I could do.” She stopped and said, “You’re the first one who’s saying you want to help and you’re honest. But you’re a man and I’m supposed to trust you.”

She went on to tell her story. And this is a 14 year old scripture-theology teacher. We got to the point of “so what did the trafficker, what did the pimp, say to you that you finally gave in and allowed yourself to be prostituted?” She was a runaway. She said, “When they told me they were going to kill my mom, I had to. I love my mom.”

We hear in scripture about “and laid down his life for his friends” and we hear that and we atalk about “Sweet Jesus” and isn’t it nice of Jesus, doing this, doing that. How many of us would do THAT and lay down our lives to protect someone that we love.

Wesley: I want to offer a moment of silence for all the children of God who our advocacy is for, and who Deacon Steve brought into the room today, and Mary Beth and Bruce as well.

Often I hear “why does the church care about that” or “isn’t that for politicians” or “those crooks in Washington” where I live. Advocacy is seeing the face of God in people on the margin as all three of our panelists were sharing. What does God’s kingdom look like in your work? We know that the kingdom is both already and not yet. What are the glimpses of the kingdom that you noticed, because that’s what we’re building towards, right? That’s what networking, formation, advocacy, all of it, the work that we do in service of God for the kingdom.

Bruce: When I really see this all coming together, that unity of voice, the messaging, and us coming together to advocate for justice, peace and on behalf of those that can’t advocate for themselves. I do see glimpses in those projects that we’re working on, where we really do care to listen. I struggle with the right word for this, because we’re often criticized for saying “empowering” people in middle and low income countries, but too often we dis-empower them by the way we interact and so giving them back their appropriate power to act on their own behalf.

When you see that happening, you see glimpses of the place that we’re supposed to be. I believe we’re helping to do that through advocacy both in public policy about domestic issues, about global issues and that we’re working with these organizations, like I said, the WHO, the Vatican, USAID on issues that are affecting our brothers and sisters around the world.

Mary Beth: I’m a little broken up right now. My first days with CRS were in Ecuador working on human trafficking, so you’re bringing up a lot of memories. Thank you for sharing that.

For me, what we’re working towards is really working as one human family around the world. That might sound a little cliché, but if we really are members of God’s family, we care about what’s happening to our brothers and sisters, and we are motivated and care about doing whatever we can to make a difference in their lives. My husband is from Nigeria so very often we hear about a lot of need and there’s no way we can say no.

I wish that was the case when we are speaking about people who are not our blood relatives, that if we learn about the stories of people and if we help people in our diocese and our communities be able to share the stories of those that they encounter, whether they encounter them in person, or they encounter them virtually, or they encounter them secondhand through reading something, or seeing a video. If they’re able to share those stories with people that have the ability to make decisions on funding, on policy, decisions that impact the lives of people, I think that we would have

a much more flourishing and vibrant family that really is connected and that shows we care about one another and living out Jesus's call for us.

Steve: I'm advocating right now. I shared with you the common denominator of sexual abuse. We've all been critical of our church and rightfully so, but we need to take a deeper look at society as a whole. It took me a lot of years after studying the role of pornography and trafficking and men going to rent the body of women and children. To find out twenty years of study, that 70% of men in the United States who worship, on Friday nights as a Muslim, on Saturdays as a Jew, on Sundays as a Christian, 70% of men who worship have viewed pornography in the course of the week at least one time. Of that group of men, 20% spend hours and hours. And of that group, 2,3,4% depending on where in the country, take action to go to rent the body of a person. They don't always follow through. Sometimes church works. I'm not saying sometimes it doesn't, but this is a struggle. This past weekend, I was preaching here in Waukesha, and three men asked me for my card, and by Sunday night, all three had contacted me by phone, text message or email and two women also asked me for my card. Which is normal, women who have been trafficked and only one of those had reached out. Since I began including pornography in my preaching, one of the things is learning the stories of men. They mirror the stories of the women. The experience of sexual abuse as a child. The same damning, if you will, "it's your fault." Maybe I can just identify more as a male, saying, "You just suck it up. Men don't cry." All this stuff buried.

It's important not to lose sight, and if you want to make it easier, talk about the financial damage if you can't talk about the physical, spiritual, emotional damage. We had one woman in our program who was literally locked in a cellar and raped at 8, 9, 10 years old. When she was in our program, she had so many health problems, and they had to do so many surgeries over the course of four or five years, it was over a million dollars. She's only one that I'm aware of. We can't just say, "We love God, we love Jesus, I believe." We are in a position to take action within our families and extended families, to talk about these dirty secrets. Families don't want to talk about the dirty secrets.

I believe absolutely that we as the Catholic Church have the golden opportunity from our experience to talk out of our experience and out of the experience of victims to say we have to stop this.

Wesley: Thank you. We could spend hours up here, as every panelist could. I'll end by saying as Teresa of Avila said, we are Christ's hands and feet in the world and we have a missionary call to help other people realize that as well.

Resources

[Staff Directory \(chausa.org\)](http://chausa.org) – Bruce Compton

[CRS' Campaign on Climate Change](#) – the campaign Mary Beth Iduh mentioned

[Franciscan Peacemakers – Franciscan Peacemakers Social Enterprise](#) – Deacon Steve