



# The Social Advocacy Model

*Who will speak on behalf of youth and young adults? Rarely will it be one from their own group. Then who? A hurting mother whose child felt perpetually marginalized, even at church, and eventually ended it all through suicide? Who will speak or represent the youth and young adults? Will it be simply for a line item in the church budget or something more radical like a paradigm shift that affects the entire church as well as the community?*

The Social Advocacy Model moves beyond short-term acts of service to embrace justice. This requires more personal investment (time, money, energy, influence) than feeding the homeless once a month or supporting an annual mission trip. Calls for justice expose systems and demand change. This creates resistance. Politics come into play because this involves people and multiple layers of systems. The few churches that try this model usually bow out when it comes to systemic changes outside their church walls.

Youth and young adult ministries typically occur in large churches. These serve the privileged more than the marginalized. They often try to “keep their own” or “retrieve the ones they lost” rather than serving the larger community of youth and young adults. Few churches advocate or empower the disenfranchised, which includes the majority of young people in the world. Instead of photo ops during charity excursions or wake up calls to “how good we have it in safe suburbia,” the Social Advocacy Model calls for entrance into the world of marginalized

young people, living with them, and changing the systems that keep them marginalized. (A special thanks to Steve Yeagley and Franklin Bray for their significant contribution to flesh out this model.)

## **Biblical Basis**

The incarnation of Jesus Christ as Immanuel (God with us—Matthew 1:23) illustrates the social advocacy model from God’s perspective. Few who appreciate God’s investment by becoming flesh among us (John 1:1, 12, 14) would want to follow suit either in the Isaiah 53 example or the Philippians 2:5-11 admonition. Who would want to trade places with the disenfranchised? Jesus already has (2 Corinthians 5:21)!

When given the chance to announce his mission before his hometown synagogue (Luke 4:16-20), Jesus chose Isaiah 61:1-2 as his passage. The familiar “setting captives free” would have been welcomed had it personally benefitted those present. But Christ referenced outsiders instead of those present. This incited fury to the point of mob action determined to eliminate the unwanted voice.

Social advocacy rarely is soothing or compliant!

Humans tend to set up social systems in pyramid style, which works ideally for those who would play “king of the hill.” Scripture turns this upside down and describes God’s kingdom as one that cares for the least of these (Matthew 24:31-46; James 1:27; Isaiah 1:17-18). Those who emphasize orthodoxy would do well to begin here! Churches usually serve the their dominant group or rising stars rather than the marginalized (James 2:1-9).

The God who became human, now represents humans in heaven (Hebrews 4:14-16). He hasn’t left us behind. Instead, God is with us on earth through the Holy Spirit, and we are present in heaven through Jesus Christ (John 14:15-21). In the same manner, God’s people are called to advocate where people have been disenfranchised, to take God’s presence to them, and to set them free.

### **What It Looks Like**

Young people, for the most part, fit in the marginalized portions of society. If the young people in your city came to your church (not just the nice and clean-cut kids), what would that look like? What would happen?

You can reverse the image. If your church spent a day living with the young people in your city, where would you actually be? What would happen?

Go to schools, go to the poor areas of town, ask the police, inquire at social services, explore the difference between private and public medical services, live on the streets for a week. Then ask yourself who is marginalized.

Don’t sucker for the easy answers, because it’s much deeper and more complicated than that. We find it much easier to give a homeless man a hamburger or slip

him a \$5 bill rather than living with him, have him live with us, or come to understand his individual story.

The Social Advocacy Model may start with simple service activities, but it moves beyond to the reasons why people need charity. Why doesn’t the homeless person get a job? Why doesn’t the government take care of them? Why doesn’t our church do more? Why don’t I? Keep asking questions. Keep searching for answers. When you meet resistance, you’re probably starting to make a difference.

### **Keys To Make It Work**

You need 3 P’s to make this work: passion, perception, and perseverance. Passion initially drives this model. Young people have a general sense of justice, but often lack the depth of understanding or the experience to move beyond simple acts of kindness. Adults who nurture this can actually plant the seeds that take the young people farther than the adults wanted them to go! That’s when the passion of young people takes this past the tipping point.

Perception not only sees who gets marginalized, but also why and how. This type of perception sees beyond simple answers or hand-me-down generalizations and stereotypes. You need this for “street smarts” as well as how to “fight city hall” (or the church board, for that matter). When an older, wiser person provides the necessary perception that teams up with the passion of young people, the Social Advocacy Model has a chance to get traction.

Perseverance doesn’t mean “pedal-to-the-medal” as much as persistently returning after being rebuffed, exhausted, beaten, discouraged, and bloodied. To endure the suffering, misunderstanding, hatred, and attacks that social advocacy provokes necessitates perseverance.

## **Obstacles**

The primary obstacle is human nature—selfishness! Systems formalize this into socially acceptable norms. Explanations and rationale adequately present one side of the story, but not both sides. For example, when it came to the woman caught in adultery and brought to Jesus (John 8:3-11), let's say that she was guilty. That would be just one side of the story. Where was the guilty male (see Deuteronomy 22:22)? That's the other side.

Another obstacle is sheer difficulty—it's hard! Churches create their own systems that often mirror society, including selfishness, self-seeking, self-exalting, and even self-preserving. Discouragement, anger, frustration, cynicism, and alienation easily attach to those in this model, especially if they don't frequently return to an anchor in God's call and hope and love.

## **Opportunities**

The needs are endless and recurring. Young people comprise about half of the world's population. Selfishness takes many forms everywhere. Setting people free, like Jesus did, will place you in conflict with individuals and institutions, and it will place you into fellowship with His sufferings and His victory and His joy.

