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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

**FUNCTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN PUBLIC POLICY DECISION-MAKING:
AN EMERGING PHENOMENON FOR FAITH LEADERS
IN THE UNITED STATES**

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Abstract

It is time for a healing journey in public policy-making for the United States. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a way for faith leaders to become more fully engaged in the public policy process by assuming functional accountability as change agents through reconciliatory advocacy.

Key concepts: functional accountability; reconciliatory advocacy

Introduction

There is very little talk across the aisle in the legislative halls of the United States of America. When policy-makers do address one another, it tends to be self-serving and adversarial. In the immortal observation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, it is sound and fury signifying nothing. Yet, within this democratic republic the expectation of we the people is that elected officials are advocates. .

On the campaign trail politicians brazenly promise to represent our values and ideas should we elect them. We stand in long lines to vote only to be disappointed, discouraged, and disillusioned when legislation that would improve our quality of life is defeated and often not even addressed. No one speaks for us. The time has come for our voices to be heard. It is time for a healing journey in public policy-making for the United States.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a way for faith leaders to become more fully engaged in the public policy process. They can do this by assuming functional accountability as change agents through reconciliatory advocacy. The first section will describe the current state of the public policy process in the United States of America.

The State of the Public Policy Process in the United States of America

Events such as the devastation caused in 2005 by Hurricane Katrina in the city of New Orleans, Louisiana (USA) and the subsequent breakdown in welfare delivery systems highlight the importance of being able to mobilize local leaders during the implementation of public policy. Community leaders, neighborhood leaders, and faith leaders are in a much better position to know the immediate needs of local citizenry and to know where the needy are. Tragically, though research supports the desire of everyday citizens to have a voice in the public policy process, rarely do community people, public officials, and educators get together to discuss policy ideas except during an election year. Thus, politics is a barrier to promoting citizen involvement in the formulation and implementation of public policy; especially in areas with a large number of marginalized persons.

The time is come to tear down that barrier. The time is come for reconciliatory advocacy. This is the functional accountability of faith leaders.

This section described the current state of the public policy process in the United States of America. The next section will describe how faith leaders are emerging in the public policy process of the United States of America. Additionally, it will identify elements of the public policy process and illustrate ways faith leaders have become and can become functionally accountable in that process. Finally, it will describe ways to overcome barriers to functional accountability.

The Emergence of Faith Leaders in the Public Policy Process

Seldom do deteriorating circumstances improve spontaneously. Without intervention situations tend to remain the same or decline. Currently in the United States of America there is a downward spiral in the relationship between policy-makers and everyday citizens. This rift is spreading like a misdiagnosed disease. It is treated inappropriately. The result is the healing process is hindered in some instances and inadvertently terminated in others. For example, in regards to public policy, a law might be passed that addresses a single issue of a multifaceted problem but produces disastrous unintended consequences all because the voice of those whom it impacts is ignored or discounted; all because the intent of we the people is not communicated.

Al Bartell (2006) offers an answer. He contends, “Currently we are in the communications age where we measure our effectiveness by how we communicate. In this age of communication, we must empower ... faith leaders to plan, develop, evaluate and analyze public policy initiatives. Additionally, we must empower them to track the communication, issues, and impact of public policy initiatives.” Simply stated, they must become functionally accountable in the public policy process through reconciliatory advocacy. Faith leaders must emerge to give voice to the intent of everyday citizens.

It is important to note that faith leaders have always been accountable for impacting social welfare and social justice legislation. It is a prophetic mandate. Micah 1:6 (KJV) confronts faith leaders asking, "...what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" Is this not a directive to become involved with the decision-making process of public policy? How can justice and mercy be executed except through ethical, effective public policy?

Increasingly faith leaders are becoming functional, that is, actively engaged in public policy decision-making. This is not really a new phenomenon; rather, it is a re-emergence of faith-based social action like that of the Civil War era or the Civil Rights era and other epochs in United States history. It can be viewed as new because of the novelty of mediums, such as cell phones, blackberries, ipods, audio-visual conferencing, email and web-based advocacy afforded by the Communications Age.

The Public Policy Process

The public policy decision making process is the course of action taken at any level of government that results in the development and implementation of legislation or procedural guidelines to ensure the health and welfare of the citizens of a city/town, county, state, or the country. There are several levels of the public policy process in the United States of America. They are cities and towns, counties, state governments, and the federal government.

The emergence of functionally accountable faith leaders on each of these levels includes:

- (a) Elected officials
- (b) Aids to elected officials
- (c) Citizen lobbyists

(d) Legislative advocates

They also serve on:

(e) task forces

(f) steering committees

(g) commissions

(h) boards of directors

(i) ...and advisory boards.

Significantly, Christians in social work are a part of the emergence of faith leaders in the public policy process, especially those who are contemporary macro practitioners.

Reconciliatory Advocacy

When during discourse government hears the voice of we the people and respond with moral, just and fair policies and laws, the result is two-fold. There is not only economic prosperity but, most importantly, a sense of well-being is instilled within individuals and thus communities. As Proverbs 29:2a (KJV) confirms, “When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice...” While the scripture specifically references a person or persons, reconciliatory advocates understand that laws and policies are the embodiment authority as well.

In 2005, Bridgeman & Bartell coined the phrase *reconciliatory advocacy*. They characterize it as the practice of facilitating discourse between government and those governed that will result in the implementation of ethical, effective public policy. It is a values-centered course of action whose result is improved quality of life for the everyday citizen, the masses that the Declaration of Independence calls “*We the people*”.

Functional Accountability in Public Policy Decision Making Process

The stakeholders in the process of reconciliatory advocacy are we the people and policy makers. Policy makers, who may be elected or appointed, serve in local, state, or federal decision making bodies. We the people are everyday citizens – some who lead; some who concede their voices trusting those who lead. Those who answer the call to lead, assume functional accountability in the public policy decision making process. Faith leaders executing this functionally accountability carry out active, specific engagement (function) to complete assigned responsibilities (accountability) of a predetermined scope of work (e.g., design a specific piece of legislation; implement a specific authorization, such as faith based initiatives).

Functional accountability is illustrated below:

Function	Accountability	Barrier
Process	Communication - Write scholarly articles, create positions papers, design procedural manuals, and facilitate electronic exchange of information.	Capacity – skills and ability. If a person is unable to communicate effectively, then their reliability for participating in the process is limited.
Model	Prevention and intervention - Faith leaders become involved in the decision-making process of public policy.	Reliable stakeholders – Individuals who are only interested in registering a complaint do not have a sufficient intention to be stakeholders in prevention and intervention strategies. Most people stop their engagement with the process at the delivery of the complaint. That’s human and there’s nothing “wrong” with it; however, it is not a sufficient engagement practice to deliver strategies that lead to the application of reliable prevention and intervention models.

Figure 1

Function	Accountability	Barrier
Methodology	Needs assessment - Identify key barriers to decision makers receiving the input of We the People by conducting roundtable discussions, development sessions, symposiums and conferences on public policy management.	Access to data – Even the basic level of datum represented by demographic information has to be current, relative, and available inside of the domain of the affected pre-determined population.
Approach	Relationship building and analysis - Facilitate development of collaboratives and coalitions.	Tracking specific concerns – Persons tend to think that the problem or solutions begins and ends with who they are as an individual, when the actual circumstances are a function of relationships.
Framework	Scope of Work - Become involved the decision-making process by submitting position papers or speaking persuasively in venues where legislators and other public policy decision makers gather; campaign for elected office with a We the People centered platform.	Case management standards – The breakdown of a given framework occurs when the scope of work is based on arbitrary reference points when the reliability reference point is a function of existing standards.

Figure 1(Continued)

Overcoming barriers to functional accountability

The barriers to functional accountability are challenging, but not insurmountable. There are a number of ways to overcome them. One way is through development sessions focused on building the capacity of individuals and groups by identifying and/or cultivating inherent skills and abilities of individuals, groups and organizations. Convening symposiums and conferences or publishing scholarly articles and position papers on public policy to increase stakeholder awareness is another means of overcoming barriers to functional accountability.

For Christians in social work, conducting round table discussions is an excellent way to begin dismantling these barriers. “The process of a round table discussion allows individuals, groups, and organizations to communicate their intentions in the scope of work called public policy management” (Bartell 2006:2). A round table discussion is:

1. a discussion or conference with several participants;
2. an informal group consideration of a topic;
3. a formal discourse upon a topic (spoken or written expression);
4. an informal discussion of a matter by representatives of governments, institutions, or organizations;
5. a formal and lengthy, written or spoken discussion of a subject;
6. communication that involves the process or power of reasoning;
7. to engage in an oral exchange of thoughts, opinions, and feelings;
8. exposition upon a topic (statement of meaning or intent); and/or
9. ...speaking of definitive statements to give an explanation of difficult material (Bartell 2006).

This process of involving citizens in the development of their neighborhood is a classic approach to community organization used by macro practitioners (Brueggeman 2006).

This section described how faith leaders are emerging in the public policy process of the United States of America. Additionally, it identified elements of the public policy process and illustrate ways faith leaders have become and can become functionally accountable in that process. Finally, it described ways to overcome barriers to functional accountability.

Conclusion

Contemporary disasters affecting the United States of America served as a rude awakening to the need for faith leaders to become involved in the decision making process of public policy. Many have responded by becoming functionally accountable for ensuring the voice of everyday citizens is heard. They have done this through reconciliatory advocacy, which is the practice of facilitating discourse between government and those governed so that ethical,

effective public policy is implemented. This values-centered course of action results in improved quality of life for the everyday citizen, the masses that the Declaration of Independence calls "*We the people*".

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