

What is *advocacy* — and why should Christians care?

A CONVERSATION WITH STEPHEN REEVES

Story by John Pierce, Executive Editor,
Baptists Today

DECATUR, Ga. — Stephen Reeves joined the staff of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship last fall to assume a new position as associate coordinator for advocacy and partnerships. An attorney and Baptist layman, Reeves moved from his hometown of Austin, Texas, where he served as director of public policy with the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, formerly led by CBF executive coordinator Suzii Paynter.

Earlier he worked as a staff attorney with the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. He is married to Deborah Gaddis Reeves, a CBF-endorsed chaplain. They are expecting their first child this summer.

Baptists Today editor John Pierce talked with Reeves about the Fellowship's new emphasis on advocacy.

BT: Advocacy, as a word, is not considered part of our common church nomenclature. So what is your working definition of advocacy?

SR: The most basic definition is to speak out on behalf of another, to take their concerns as your own and use your voice to help change that problem or situation. While this can certainly be accomplished by seeking a change in public policy at the local, state or federal level, it can also be done on an individual basis through non-policy means.

I think it is also important for an advocate to help an individual or group find and effectively use their own voice. We should not assume we always have the right answer for what others need; we should help empower them to advocate for themselves as well.

BT: How does advocacy fit within the overall mission of Christian churches and organizations of churches such as the Fellowship? And how is advocacy already at work in CBF life?

SR: The biblical call to care for our neighbors — particularly the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized — is undeniable. The vast majority of churches and Christian organizations recognize and take very seriously this responsibility in a number of ways.

Fortunately, in this country that responsibility of the faithful is paired with the opportunity to impact the broader community through the democratic process. We should exercise responsible citizenship.

National religious bodies work together all the time at the federal level on issues of common agreement, to raise awareness and a shared moral voice appealing to the conscience of our elected officials on important issues. It is time that CBF take its rightful place at that table.

While an emphasis on advocacy from the national office is new, there are already many advocates within CBF life — people who have a calling to help others and improve communities.

This applies to field personnel working with some of the most oppressed and marginalized people across the world, but also to pastors and ministers of missions in local congregations as well as laity. Many of our church members are already committed to important issues like health care, education, hunger, missional business and so many others.

But, I think it is important to have a voice of advocacy at the national level because it says a great deal about who we are as a fellowship of Baptist Christians. I firmly

believe that by raising the profile of our public witness, CBF has a great chance to be recognized in the broader culture as the type of Baptists that effectively work for the common good.

BT: On whose behalf do you — and others who embrace this mission — advocate? How is this different from so-called “special interest” lobbying?

SR: I think we start by advocating for and with those we come into contact in our churches, communities and mission work. When we encounter needs or injustice, we should feel empowered to speak out to help change those situations however we can.

We should pay particular attention to those who have little voice or representation in the political process whether that be at the city, county, state or national level. This is an important distinction between lobbying and being an advocate.

Lobbyists have an important place and valuable expertise. However, they are paid to represent the best interests of their client. Advocates represent the well-being of folks who aren't paying their contract. Often this can mean folks with fewer financial resources, children, victims of predatory lending or human trafficking.

This advocacy position has not been established to argue for policy that always favors our churches above others. An advocate does not work out of self-interest and, believe me, that is quite uncommon in the policy arena — and it gets folks' attention.

BT: In addition to your coming to this position, a couple of recent announcements show that CBF leaders are serious about advocacy work. How do the one-year appointment of Christian ethicist David

Gushee of Mercer University and the collaboration with the Baptist World Alliance to increase efforts at the United Nations help fulfill this mission?

SR: I think, first and foremost, our pastors and church members need to have a clear understanding of what we mean by advocacy and why we feel compelled by the Gospel to be advocates in this world.

David Gushee is one of our finest theologians and Christian ethicists. He not only comes with marvelous academic credentials, but also an established commitment to communicating on a popular level to our pastors and church members.

In addition, he has stepped into the fray of public policy a number of times including on issues of torture and environmental stewardship, demonstrating that these issues are not just a cerebral exercise but need to be lived out. As Baptists, our actions should always start with a clear understanding of what scripture is calling us to do.

We need someone of his caliber to help establish and communicate a clear biblical foundation for this work. I've been following his work and writing for years, and I'm thrilled that he has accepted this challenge and for the chance [I have] to work closely alongside him.

There is no doubt our world is getting smaller and folks recognize that "neighbor" can also mean those very far away. We have field personnel in placements across the globe, and so many of our churches are engaged in hands-on international mission work.

Once again, the United Nations is a place where religious organizations with a global presence work together. The BWA has been active at the UN for many years, earning respect and all the proper credentials as a nongovernmental organization.

Recently, their well-earned access and opportunities to engage have been underused. Suzii developed this partnership through her connection with Raimundo Barreto, the director of the Division of Freedom and Justice, to help advance our common concerns.

The BWA has recently focused much of its work in the areas of human rights and sustainable development. The CBF already has two individuals committed to this work as volunteer representatives: Phyllis Boozer has begun working with the Congress of Non-Governmental Organizations' committee on the status of women. And Shane McNary, one of our European field



personnel, is working on international religious liberty issues at meetings of the UN in Geneva, Switzerland.

BT: You've distinguished already between advocacy on behalf of those who experience injustice (and lack the power to bring change) and lobbying to promote self-interest in the halls of power. But can you say a little about how you navigate what some might call "getting into politics" or "being controversial" — as if those are necessarily things to avoid?

SR: This type of work is not without risk. But I'm convinced the Gospel calls us to "risk something big for something good" — as the benediction that Roger Paynter recites nearly every Sunday at First Baptist Austin says.

Jesus took on the serious issues of the day including those we would now consider political. We cannot be at our most effective working on behalf of the "least of these" in our society without getting into these issues.

However, I think we need to be sensitive to the realities of the environment in which our pastors and church members live. [An example is] one that is hyper-politicized and more focused on winning an argument or being right than making progress on things that matter. In that regard there are ways to avoid or mitigate such fights, and we will work to do that and try and teach others how.

I think the most important thing is start with scripture to discern what the Bible says about an issue. By starting with what we see in our community and telling the stories of the folks we've encountered in ministry, we can put a face and a specific example to a problem that can help us break out of a partisan political framework.

BT: Where — that is, at what levels of power — does advocacy take place?

SR: Advocacy can take place on an individual basis all the way through the halls of Congress and in the White House. A great deal of progress on important issues takes place on the city and state level.

BT: How important is collaboration — the building of coalitions — to the success of advocacy? What other factors should be considered when choosing the right issue to address and the best approach to take?

SR: Coalitions are essential to this type of work, but we need to be clear about what it means and what it does not mean.

By joining with other organizations — often with very different motivations, beliefs and constituents — you do not sign off on their entire agenda. Instead, you work together strategically on the defined set of goals you have in common.

By doing so, you share the workload and also draw from the collective political strength or influence. This is quite common in the advocacy world.

It also allows us to benefit from each other's expertise. If a Fellowship pastor or church member feels called to work on a certain issue that we are not experts on, we can introduce them to other trusted partners with whom we have established a relationship through working in coalition.

Issue selection is very important. We will start by working on issues that we know to be important to our churches, pastors and field personnel.

Of course, we will never speak on behalf of all CBF Baptists. That would be impossible,

and would also violate our understanding of the priesthood of the believer and local church autonomy.

We will look for an issue where there is broad consensus without being paralyzed by a lack of total unanimity. We'll also be looking for those places where our voice can be most effective — issues that maybe haven't garnered much attention from the faith community but where there is real opportunity for progress.

However, I think a large part of my job will not be about deciding “from the top” which issues to select, but to help raise up the voices of advocates already busy at work among both churches and individuals in the Fellowship; to connect them and help them to be more effective.

We hope to help generate within CBF churches a new understanding of advocacy as missions and to establish a new “ecosystem” within CBF life where other issues of emphasis will be generated from the “bottom up.”

The community ministries of our churches and field personnel often encounter situations or issues that call for broader advocacy. Through a new cultivation of networks called “missions communities” — each focused on one of eight areas of mission — we hope to connect existing CBF advocates to one another and to the national advocacy office.

As we encourage more advocacy work by CBF churches and individuals, we also hope to help make them more effective by offering advice and expertise, and connecting them to other organizations working on their particular issue of interest.

Additionally I want to ensure that our field personnel, both international and domestic, can help identify issues of concern they encounter in their ministries that we should address.

BT: What did you and CBF Executive Coordinator Suzii Paynter learn from your work in Texas that you bring to the Fellowship and its many churches in various settings? What kind of help can you offer congregations or coalitions eager to deal with issues of injustice?

SR: I think we learned a lot in our seven-plus years working together. In particular, I think we learned how to work in a very bi-partisan or nonpartisan manner; that is, how to work in a very politically diverse and, at times, challenging environment — and to talk about and make progress on a variety

of issues in a way that does not feed into the typical left-right ideological debates.

We learned how to build critical relationships based on respect and not by deciding who are the “good guys” and who are the “bad guys.”

As difficult as it is, I am convinced that Christians cannot let our behavior in the public square be dictated by the typical behavior of others. We learned that how we advocate is often just as important as what we are advocating for.

BT: What are four or five issues being addressed today — or that need to be addressed legislatively?

SR: There are already a few issue areas where work has begun. These include:

1. Local church and broader policy initiatives combating predatory lending, specifically payday and auto title lending
2. Anti-hunger advocacy including work with Bread for the World, a long-time partner where CBF is represented on the board by Devita Parnell
3. Advocating for comprehensive immigration reform through work with the Evangelical Immigration Table
4. Work on international religious liberty primarily through a new partnership with the Baptist World Alliance.

Additionally, Gary Skeen of the Church Benefits Board has been out traveling the country to help individuals and churches understand the changes in health care that are occurring as a result of the Affordable Care Act and what it means for them.

BT: Often we learn best by example. Can you share a success story from your work in Austin with the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission? And what are the elements of that story that might help others to do advocacy well?

SR: There are so many great stories from over the years. But one of my favorites is when pastor Jeff Johnson of First Baptist Church of Commerce, Texas, currently president of Texas Baptists, came to testify in a House committee hearing about how payday lending had affected his community.

He told a story from when he was pastor of First Baptist Church of Del Rio, about how employees of a payday lender were going to the nearby mental health clinic and soliciting adults with developmental difficulties to take out loans.

He said that many of those individuals were honored that someone would respect them enough to give them a loan, so they signed the forms and took the money. The end result was that they would essentially owe the lender their entire disability check every two weeks.

I had never heard this story. I had worked on drafting this bill for many weeks, and we had never considered this situation.

The members of the House committee were outraged and asked for a sworn statement that he and his church members had witnessed this. The next time the bill draft came back from the committee chair there was a new section outlawing solicitation or advertisements at such facilities, and the bill ultimately passed.

That is a testament to the power of a story — one told at the right time, by the right person.

The lobby forces of the multi-billion dollar industry aren't fond of additional regulations. But when a pastor, a leader in his community, took the time to come to Austin — at a critical point in the legislative process to speak out for someone else, a person his church has ministered to — it brought about change.

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