



# Mercy Advocacy

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## **A few comments on early feedback re the vision statement**

### **1. Service vs advocacy.**

Is this a real division? Or is it the hand-in-hand approach we've always had. We come from 150 years where the main direction of our work as Sisters of Mercy was service. Yet we saw from the advocacy stories that individual sisters were moved to stand up for people they knew were suffering injustice, or sometimes just to stand in solidarity with them. Witness those writing to Diane Fingleton, former Queensland Chief Magistrate, when she was in prison.

No matter where we worked, Australia or overseas, underlying our work has been the fundamental principle of the dignity of the human person. This has held whether they were sick or dying, children from troubled families or from all kinds of minority groups needing education to get a chance in society. It has also included adults rejected by society, and the laity, especially women who needed support in Church society. Likewise as we worked to serve we have constantly looked for better ways to improve the situation of these people, to improve the patterns of the ways we served (dare we call it seeking to make changes to our structures or the structures of the systems we were working in e.g. education, hospital care, family services, parishes, chaplaincies, prisons etc). In other words, there has always been a balancing factor between immediate direct service and seeking change for the better. When we were young and in great numbers our compassion led us to direct service with a less obvious emphasis on seeking to change what was creating the problem in the first place.

Having let go the large institutions we, as a whole group committed to God's love and compassion for the poor and marginalised, now have more freedom to take risks in challenging laws and policies which create cruelty for large groups of people in our society. Now the balance between direct service and standing with others for change is shifting and we are naming this shift mercy advocacy. Both arms are needed to keep us grounded.

### **2. Sisters of Mercy committed to non-violence and peace**

On the simplest level we pray for peace with the Agnus Dei at whatever Eucharist we have ever attended.

More specifically we have committed ourselves to this in the last two Chapters 2003 and 2008:

‘Aware of the spiritual hunger and desire for peace within ourselves and others,  
we commit to non-violence for the healing and liberation of our world’  
(2008)

The two quotes which follow have made a lot of sense over the years:

(i) *‘Nonviolence is not a resignation from all real fighting against wickedness. On the contrary, the nonviolence of my conception is a more active and real fight against wickedness than retaliation whose very nature is to increase wickedness. Disobedience to be civil must be sincere, respectful, restrained never defiant, must be based upon some well-understood principle, must not be capricious and above all must have no ill-will or hatred behind it.’*

(M.K. Gandhi)

(ii) *“The nonviolent resistor not only avoids external, physical violence, but he avoids internal violence of spirit. He not only refuses to shoot the opponent, but he refuses to hate him. And he stands with understanding, goodwill at all times.”*

(Martin Luther King Jr.)

### **3. Inside and outside conventional political channels**

#### **Inside conventional political channels**

The main conventional political channel for change is the exercise of our right to vote.

We also have the right to approach our parliamentary representatives by personal visit, phone or by letter or email. In terms of public voice it is also valid to present a petition to parliament or attend a public meeting especially one organized by a group in authority such as a council meeting, commission etc.

Are these ways useful?

Certainly, Russell Broadbent, one of the four advocates in the Howard government of more humane policies for asylum seekers, said he had been brought to this position by letters from Sisters of Mercy and children. Letters from children are more outside the conventional political mould but are perfectly legal.

Public voice is one of the basic norms of a democracy whether it is a statement, an expression of support for a group position or attendance at a meeting, public gathering, a rally or a protest march.

Those with wealth, power (“vested interests”) can use these through advocating, lobbying, investment to further their own interests eg the recent mining campaign against the carbon tax. Public group action may be the only way to let those in government know that a large number of people feel very strongly about an issue of injustice. (Remember *Friends of Felton* campaigning against coal mining on the Darling Downs) Politicians can only afford to ignore this at their cost i.e. the ballot box.

### **Outside political channels**

Problems arise when authorities feel threatened by criticism of a particular issue e.g. the arrest of someone speaking out as in China or Russia. But this also presents a problem when authority in our own country feels threatened on a particular issue. What is a perfectly valid form of protest may become hindered, have laws passed against it, be denied or punished by confrontation as in the time of Premier Bjelke Petersen in Queensland. Many watchers in society judge the participants in such protests as troublemakers. Media portrayal often diminishes our capacity to see the underlying violence of the total situation. This includes the injustice of the law or policy being protested against, the violence of authority in closing off conventional political channels of public protest in a democracy and the use of police or military (both symbols of law and order in our society) to enforce these laws.

Actions against powerful economic forces are also public protests. These can include boycotts of companies who use unfair trade practices or exploit workers for greater profit. Action for care of the whole earth community is another form of this.

But there are also symbolic ways of protesting that may be outside conventional processes which can be very powerful – from song to dance to art/drama or the use of powerful images such as the *Sea of Hands for Reconciliation* or the *Rows of Shoes* in the campaign against landmines.

All of these allow for non-violent participation.

*‘The state executed Jesus legally, and the Roman soldiers who carried out the execution broke no laws – indeed the soldiers would have been guilty of civil disobedience had they refused to obey Pilate’s orders.’ James Douglass – Catholic Worker.*

The actions of US Sr Megan Rice against weapons of war take it to another dimension of sacrifice. As an 83 year old she is now facing a lengthy jail term.