

## The Love of Children: Advocacy and Agency

by Ivy Beckwith

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One of the Three Great Loves included in this recently announced initiative is the Love of Children. United Church of Christ Churches are asked to share stories of how they put their love of children into action and to develop new ways to do this in their ministry contexts.

Many of our churches will think of the Love of Children in terms of advocacy and charity. And there is nothing wrong with that. Current statistics show that 20 percent of the children in the United States live in poverty. Eighteen percent of all children in the United States, or about 13 million children, live in “food insecure” households, without consistent access to adequate food. Thirty-nine percent of America’s children live in substandard housing due to housing costs, overcrowding, and inadequate physical structures. At any given time nearly 1.4 million children find themselves homeless. And 39 percent of America’s children live in U.S. counties with pollution concentrations above current acceptable air quality standards exacerbating childhood health concerns. Work needs to be done if we are to partner with God’s spirit to provide a “just world for all,” including the children.

However, I would posit that advocacy “for children” is not the entire answer to working out the Love of Children in our parish contexts. Yes, we need to advocate for all children – not just those in the United States, but those caught in unjust and untenable situations all over the world.

But in our parish contexts it is important to pair this advocacy work with the work of giving agency to children we find in our midst. An agent can be defined as “a person or thing through which power is exerted or an end is achieved.” If we want to form our children faithfully our churches need to teach about God’s justice at an early age and give even the youngest children the tools to be justice advocates in their own right. Exploring with them the stories of Jesus and the stories of people who have fought for justice throughout history inspire them and give them the means to think about advocating for justice in their own contexts. But, it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that children are not able to think about and take this kind of action.

Faith formation expert John Westerhoff writes that too often our churches are good at doing things for children but not very good at doing things with children. Including children in our justice advocacy is one way to right this common deterrent to positive faith formation.

One of the reasons our churches lose our children when they hit the teen and college years is that we have not captured their imaginations for the reign of God. We have failed to give them the compelling narrative of Jesus' vision of a just world for all. Empowering our children to advocate for justice alongside us shows our love for them and our faith in their agency to stand against evil and stand for lovingkindness and mercy.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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