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EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY: TEN PRINCIPLES FROM NEHEMIAH

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with Amy L. Sherman

In the early 1800's, conditions at Newgate Prison in London, England, were appalling. Four hundred women were crowded into four small rooms, and fifty children were imprisoned with their mothers. All the inmates wore filthy rags, and there were no beds or blankets, no toilets, no heat, no ventilation and little light.

Elizabeth Fry, a devout woman of faith, a Quaker, happened to visit Newgate Prison in 1813 and was outraged at what she saw. Deciding to take action, she organized her friends, and they began working. They brought warm clothes and straw for bedding. They started educating the women and their children, teaching them to read, so they would have a means of supporting themselves once they were freed. Eventually, she and her friends brought full-scale reform to Newgate.

Her work in Newgate led her to speak out for prison reform across England. She met with prison officials and lawmakers, urging them to treat prisoners humanely. She founded societies to look after women once they had served their time. The success of her reforms at Newgate gave her a voice with rulers in Holland, Denmark, France, and Prussia—and the Emperor of Russia followed her suggestions when he built a new prison in St. Petersburg. Her report to the King of France summed up her philosophy: “When thee builds a prison, thee had better build with the thought ever in thy mind that thee and thy children may occupy the cells.”¹

Elizabeth Fry was an advocate.

At the turn of the 19th century, child labor was rampant in North America. Tens of thousands of children under age 14 were forced to work in dangerous conditions in textile mills in the rural south. Children as young as six years old would work six days a week, twelve hours a day, on dangerous equipment that often caused the loss of fingers or limbs.

Edgar Murphy, a minister in Alabama, was horrified when he discovered the problem. And so, he started writing. He published nine pamphlets and distributed 28,000 of them across the United States, paying for much

of the printing himself. His writing has often been called “the first body of printed material of any considerable extent or value” in favor of legislation restricting child labor in the American south. He instituted the Alabama Child Labor Committee, and, joining with others who felt strongly, founded the National Child Labor Committee, which became one of the most effective voices in bringing about the abolition of child labor in America. Edgar Murphy, it is said, “pricked the conscience of the country alive to the existence of child labor as a shame and curse to America.” 2

Edgar Murphy was an advocate.

In 2001, a quiet man named Mark Johansen and his wife Alice started praying, “God, we are entering our 50’s. Our children are grown, and we want to dream new dreams. Give us something new we can do for you.”

A year or two later Mark took a short-term missions trip to Chennai, India. While he was there he met Mullaga, a woman whose heart was burdened by how many children around her were becoming orphans because of HIV AIDS. She took Mark to meet those orphans and shared with him her dream to start an orphanage to get them off the street and provide a safe, welcoming place for them to grow up and hear about Christ.

Mark had found a new calling. He came back to his home in Charlottesville, VA, and started brainstorming and talking to people to raise money for an orphanage. He joined the world mission team at his church and started talking to them about his vision for this orphanage in India. He went back to Chennai to find out more of what starting one would entail, bringing his wife, Alice, with him, so she could begin to dream about this as well. He discovered a local nonprofit organization in Charlottesville that was doing relief work in that part of India. Its leaders helped Mark to give oversight to the project, and aided Mullaga in the “ground work” in Chennai. Mark petitioned the world missions team for regular financial support, and recruited about 16 people to give \$25- \$50 monthly. Mark will take anyone out to lunch that will let him talk about the orphans and the work in Chennai. In November of 2005, the orphanage officially opened, and now 40 children have a safe, welcoming home and a chance to hear the gospel.

Mark Johansen is an advocate.

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

Advocacy is a hot word these days. One sees it everywhere, it seems. People advocate breast cancer awareness with pink ribbons, urge “living strong” with white bands, and call to “Make Poverty History” by joining the ONE campaign. And advocacy is not only historical; it’s a current movement that is taking our nation by storm. In its January 2, 2006 edition, *Time Magazine* described the growing movement of people becoming advocates for the poor in 2005. Its cover story ended with the sentence: “In 2005 the world’s poor needed no more condolences; they needed people to get interested, get mad, and get to work.”³

Food for the Hungry Volunteer Advocates are people who have gotten interested in the world’s poor, gotten mad about their plight, and gotten to work!

But here’s a key question: What makes advocacy effective? And, in particular, what is effective advocacy for the poor? We’d like to try and answer this question by looking at a book of the Bible—Nehemiah—which is rich with lessons about effective advocacy for the poor. Ten characteristics of Nehemiah’s successful approach offer rich insights for contemporary advocacy for the poor.

NEHEMIAH’S CONTEXT

The book of Nehemiah is about how God used Nehemiah to mobilize the residents of Jerusalem to rebuild their city wall. When Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of Babylon, demolished Jerusalem in 586 BC, a considerable number of the most wealthy, educated, and powerful Jews were exiled from Jerusalem and carried off to Babylon. Archeological results have shown how utterly devastated Judah was. Most of the Jews left in Palestine were poor and unable to restore the damage done.

Over a hundred years later, in Nehemiah’s time (around 465 BC), Artaxerxes was king of Babylon. (Artaxerxes was the son of Xerxes, who took Esther to be his queen in the book of Esther.) Nehemiah was living in Babylon, serving as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. When a Jewish kinsman visited him, Nehemiah learned about the still-ruined state of Jerusalem. Deeply concerned, he asked the king if he might be allowed to go to help rebuild the walls. Artaxerxes granted his request, and Nehemiah set off.

In the Ancient Near East, a city lacking a strong surrounding wall was subject to all kinds of terrors. It was vulnerable to attack by any number of enemies. Invaders could do harm both to people and to crops and gardens.

A broken-down wall meant a physically and economically unstable environment. Residence in a city without a protective wall was a dangerous, scary, and uncertain proposition. Nehemiah would have known all this, and it would have fueled his sense of urgency.

TEN PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY FROM NEHEMIAH

What do we learn about effective advocacy for the poor from Nehemiah? Here are ten principles:

- 1» Remember and inquire about the poor, even though they may be far away
- 2» Get personally involved
- 3» Depend on God
- 4» Be a good steward of your currency of influence
- 5» Lead and mobilize others
- 6» Be courageous
- 7» Seek to learn and teach
- 8» Know you are a catalyst for change
- 9» Turn complex problems into issues that require specific action
- 10» Take what is in darkness and bring it to light.

PRINCIPLE 1

Remember and inquire about the poor, even though they may be far away. Let's look at Nehemiah chapter 1: 1-3. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

What's noteworthy here is that Nehemiah, far away from Jerusalem, cares enough to ask about the welfare of the Jews back in the holy land. Commentators tell us the Nehemiah most likely was born in exile. This means that he had never been to Jerusalem and did not personally know the people he was inquiring about. But, he took initiative to find out how they were faring—he remembered the poor, even though they were far away. It is such a simple thing, but radical.

Ever heard of the principle of proximity? Basically, this principle is that the degree to which something feels tolerable to us is in direct proportion to how close in proximity it is to us. Think about 9/11. It happened on American soil, and what was our response? Outrage. Never again. Horror. These are very appropriate responses to the tragedy. Contrast that, though, with how Americans in general responded to the genocide in Rwanda roughly a decade ago. There, approximately 800,000 people were massacred. That is equivalent to September 11th tragedy occurring twice a day, every day, for 133 days. But how did we as a country respond? Not with anywhere near the response we had to 9/11. One reason was that Rwanda is far, far away, while the September 11th tragedy unfolded upon our soil. It was close to us. Because Rwanda is located on the other side of the globe, the pain and suffering of the people there felt more tolerable to us.

Nehemiah did not operate based on the principle of proximity. Instead, he took initiative to inquire about the welfare of those far distant.

As a Food for the Hungry Advocate, you will speak out for many people you do not know, and may never meet. They are far away. Their suffering is not close at hand. But like Nehemiah, you can deliberately remember and inquire about the poor, even when live far from you.

PRINCIPLE 2

Effective Advocates get personally involved. Nehemiah got personally involved with rebuilding the wall, even though this meant that his own life was interrupted and extremely inconvenienced. How did he get involved? In two main ways: he let his heart be touched by the pain of the poor, and he took action.

Nehemiah 1:4 summarizes Nehemiah's response when he heard of the plight of his countrymen: "As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven." Nehemiah was willing to feel the pain of the Jews in Jerusalem. He did not run from it or close his eyes. He moved towards their suffering.

And then, Nehemiah took action. He got involved. He makes a request of the king (Neh. 2:5): "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it." Note that Nehemiah does not ask for King Artaxerxes to dispatch an army of others to rebuild the wall-- though he could have.

Instead, he wanted to get personally involved.

Remember, his personal involvement was not a short commitment. In the Ancient Near East, city walls were not rebuilt in a few months. We don't know exactly how long Nehemiah was gone, but in chapter 5 of the book, "12 years" is mentioned. Nehemiah packed up and left his "good job" as cupbearer; left his home, his familiar surroundings, and the comforts a working city would have offered. The modern-day equivalent might be moving down to New Orleans to help rebuild after Hurricane Katrina.

Why is personal involvement with the poor so vital? Why do Food for the Hungry Advocates get involved, starting with embracing one child through sponsorship? There are a million reasons, but here's a big one: God asks us to. He commands it. Isaiah 58:6,7 says, "Is this not the kind of fast I have chosen... to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" Or consider James 1:27: "Religion that God our Father considers pure and faultless is this: that you visit orphans and widows in their distress and keep yourself unstained by the world." Moving toward the poor, taking personal responsibility to be part of the solution to their suffering is a necessary ingredient of effective advocacy for the poor.

PRINCIPLE 3

Advocates are dependent on God. Nehemiah was a man who depended upon God. Effective advocates rely on God. This takes at least three forms. Advocates depend on God to help them move towards the poor, with all the pain and overwhelming feelings that that entails. In addition, advocates depend on God to open doors and make their advocacy effective. And advocates look to God, ultimately, to take care of the poor.

In chapter 1 verse 4, Nehemiah has just heard the disturbing report from Jerusalem. What was his response? "As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven." What's going on here? Nehemiah is feeling overwhelmed by what he has discovered, and what does he do? He prays. He takes the pain he feels, the tears and mourning, and goes to God. He relies on God to help him deal with this.

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by what you have seen around the world? Or by the statistics you hear? Or by the stories you come across? What do you do with all that emotion? Nehemiah gives us a great road map

for what to do with it all: Go to God with it. Depend on Him to sustain you.

Nehemiah's reliance upon God is evident throughout the narrative. In chapter 2, when Nehemiah is about to answer Artaxerxes' question as to why he looks so downcast, Nehemiah quickly asks God for help in formulating an answer. In chapter 4, when Nehemiah and his Jewish co-workers are being taunted and are in danger, what does he do? He prays. Nehemiah expected God to work—to open doors for his advocacy with the King, to help him know what to say, and to protect him and his men when they were in danger. We can see through Nehemiah's prayers that he was not trying to make things happen on his own. He was not trying simply to use his own energy, sense of urgency, and ability to persuade. No. We see him depending on God.

Moreover, advocates depend on God, ultimately, to care for the poor. Nehemiah knew, and we know, that it is God who cares for the poor. It is God who provides hope, life, rescue, and justice. He is the one who ultimately provides food and clothing, health and safety. We are dependent on God to be the true One who sustains, cares for, and loves the poor.

Effective advocates for the poor depend on God.

PRINCIPLE 4

Advocates are good stewards of their currency of influence. Nehemiah was a wise steward of his influence with the king. Realizing he had a voice with a powerful man who could mobilize resources, he respectfully asked for what he would need to rebuild the walls. He asked for letters for the governors of the provinces he would journey through on his way to Jerusalem—letters that would grant him safe passage. He asked for a letter for Asaph, the keeper of the king's park, so that he would have the timber he needed for rebuilding. Nehemiah recognized his currency of influence with the king, and wisely “spent it” on behalf of the poor.

We all have a currency of influence. Each of us has a community of people, leaders, churches, and organizations that listen to our voice. That voice is our currency of influence—and everyone's currency is different. We can spend it—or not spend it—as we choose. Advocates recognize they have this currency, and they use it wisely on behalf of the poor.

What can this look like? One Food for the Hungry Advocate, a teacher, is going on a 3,500 mile cross-country bicycle ride he's calling the Hun-

ger Ride. Through the Hunger Ride he is rallying wealthy families of his students to give to a specific project in Ethiopia focused on helping HIV/AIDS orphans. Another advocate is approaching people she knows in local Rotary and Lions' clubs to secure invitations to speak about the poor and the work of FH. Another advocate rallied his church's missions committee to focus the congregation's annual missions conference on global poverty, and he invited a Food for the Hungry speaker to give the plenary addresses. And still another advocate is talking to businesses she frequents, inquiring about putting up child sponsorship displays. All of these advocates are being wise stewards of their currency of influence.

PRINCIPLE 5

Advocates are leaders who mobilize others. Nehemiah did not attempt to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem alone—he could not have accomplished the task that way. He invited others to join him. He was a leader who mobilized a team.

Like Nehemiah, effective advocates are leaders. And “leadership” has a broad definition. It is not limited to those who have the gift of speaking well in front of groups. Advocate leadership takes many forms. It may look like quietly, consistently talking about the poor at church mission meetings. It can mean putting forth the challenge of child sponsorship to a next-door neighbor. Sometimes leadership looks like placing displays at stores and restaurants so that patrons come face-to-face with a hurting child as they order their meals. That's leadership: challenging people to take a step outside of themselves to care about the poor.

Good leaders also realize that people with a wide array of gifts and experiences should be mobilized; that is, they aren't narrowly focused on just winning over so-called “impressive” folks. Nehemiah chapter 3 presents a long list of the people Nehemiah rallied to rebuild the walls. And what's noteworthy is how very diverse the list is. It includes carpenters, gold smiths, perfumers, rulers and their sons, priests, temple servants, merchants, men and women. People from all walks of life joined in—the “high society” ruling class, common servants, and everyone in between. Nehemiah recruited people from all walks of life, because all different kinds of people were needed to help rebuild the walls. There were many jobs to do.

Effective advocates realize that there is a place for everyone in the struggle against poverty. No one is not needed; everyone is valuable. Too

often we can be tempted to think we are only looking for a certain kind of volunteer to get involved, and we don't cast our net very wide as we look around for those we can rally. But the reality is that are ways everyone can help, and indeed, everyone is needed to help. Advocates are leaders who mobilize all different kinds of people to get engaged in caring for the poor.

PRINCIPLE 6

Advocates are courageous. C.S. Lewis once said, "Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at its testing point, which means, at the point of highest reality. A chastity or honesty or mercy which yields to danger will be chaste or honest or merciful only on condition. Pilate was merciful till it became risky." Courage is essential in advocacy.

Nehemiah was a man of courage. In chapter 2, Nehemiah tells of opposition by officials: "They mocked us and despised us and said, 'What is this thing you are doing?'" And they accused him of rebelling against the king. What was Nehemiah's response? He bravely stands up to them, and answers their taunts. He does not shrink back or collapse in discouragement. In chapter 4, we see him again boldly resisting the enemies who had conspired together to fight against him, actively trying to keep Nehemiah's team from rebuilding the wall. Nehemiah was courageous.

In your advocacy, you likely will not confront such blatant, active opposition. But your advocacy will nevertheless require courage. Sometimes it will require courage to approach a storeowner you don't know, in order to ask for permission to place an FH display in his store. You will need the courage to not get discouraged, but instead to keep on approaching church leaders for speaking venues even when you have been turned down. You may someday require the courage to get back up in front of a group of Rotarians to talk, when your last presentation was a flop. Effective advocacy takes courage.

PRINCIPLE 7

Advocates are constantly learning and teaching others. In Nehemiah 2: 11-16, Nehemiah takes time to learn the situation, to educate himself and his men about what is really going on in Jerusalem. He spends three days taking his men along and simply investigating. He goes by night to the Valley Gate, the Dragon Spring, the Dung Gate, the Fountain Gate.

He wants to see for himself, to listen, look, and learn. Like him, effective advocates take time to educate themselves—about God’s passion for the poor and about the many needs out there in the world.

But advocates are also teachers. They teach about God’s heart for the poor, even as they seek to learn about the problem of poverty worldwide. So much of what advocates do is simply finding out for themselves, and then telling others, that poverty is a huge problem, that God wants His people to respond to it, and that one person really can make a difference.

PRINCIPLE 8

Advocates are catalysts for change. The walls of Jerusalem had laid in disrepair for 141 years. There were many able-bodied people who could have helped rebuild the walls—after all, the situation was desperate and unstable—but nobody did. What was needed? An advocate who could be a catalyst for change. Someone like Nehemiah who, in the words of *Time Magazine* again, would get interested, get mad, and rally others to change their ways and get involved.

Have you heard this quote by Margaret Mead? “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Advocates are catalysts for change. They make things happen that wouldn’t occur otherwise. They get people moving. Advocates help people feel the urgency of the problem and the necessity for everyone to get involved. Effective advocates, like Nehemiah, make things happen.

Miami’s Riverside Baptist Church sports a couple key advocates who, because of their commitment and vision for the Dominican Republic, have been catalysts for change. Food for the Hungry is starting a new poverty-fighting work in a whole new Dominican village, El Tamarindo, because of these advocates’ vision and persistence. Mothers and fathers and kids and aunts and uncles—entire families, an entire community—will one day in the near future escape from a life of poverty because the advocates at Riverside Baptist Church have been catalysts for change. They are helping to make this dream a reality.

In Georgia, a world champion bodybuilder from South Africa one day called up Food for the Hungry and announced: “I want to raise money to help the poor in Ethiopia. I want to get involved.” This man has since raised \$18,000 to help finish a school in Ethiopia, and has recruited over 40

new child sponsors, simply by talking to people. Forty HIV/AIDS orphans now have a different future because Marius Vorster has been a catalyst for change. He's been a catalyst for change in the people around him—rallying them to get involved—and a catalyst for change in the lives of these children who now have sponsors who are praying for them, writing to them, and caring about them. These children are getting the school supplies and books and uniforms they need, all because Marius acted and made things happen.

PRINCIPLE 9

Advocates turn problems into issues that require specific action. Nehemiah took the complex problem of an entire city needing its wall rebuilt and divided this challenge into specific actions to repair sections and gates, with specific tasks to be accomplished in each section. When someone approached Nehemiah paralyzed by the scale of the need, Nehemiah gave him or her a specific, concrete task to do. And when everyone did his or her individual part, eventually the whole wall was rebuilt. It was one enormous job that Nehemiah broke down into specific tasks so that people could find something they could reasonably do.

Undoubtedly you are aware that the problem of world poverty is complex, overwhelming, and frankly, paralyzing in its magnitude. 24,000 people die every day from hunger and hunger-related causes—18,000 of these are children. One person dies of hunger every 3.6 seconds. That is more than 16 people each minute and 1,000 each hour.⁴ With such statistics in mind, it is easy for us all to simply collapse in despair at the enormity of the problem and do nothing.

Effective advocates take complex problems and turn them into specific issues that require action. Trying to rescue the 18,000 children who are dying every day is overwhelming. Sponsoring one child is not. Restoring the millions of buildings all over the world that are in disrepair is an unthinkably large task; helping build one classroom in Bolivia is not. Attempting to solve the problem of HIV/AIDS is paralyzing in its complexity; donating money regularly so that one family suffering from HIV/AIDS can have a monthly stipend for food is not.

This is a crucial role that advocates play, because until people see that there actually is something specific and plausible that they can do—help build a latrine in the Dominican Republic, sponsor a child in Peru, take a

trip to do a one week medical clinic in Ethiopia--they probably won't do anything at all. People need help getting handles they can grab a hold of in the fight against poverty. They need to be shown specific things they can do. Advocates turn complex problems into issues--one child needing sponsorship—that require specific action.

PRINCIPLE 10

Advocates shine light in darkness. In Nehemiah chapter 5, we see Nehemiah confronting the darkness of injustice, bringing it to light, and remedying it. Here's the context. Some of the Jews working hard on the wall-rebuilding project were poor. They had had to neglect some of their own work in their trades or in the fields in order to labor on the wall. In addition, some of these poor people had been experiencing financial hardship prior to the wall-building project; hardship that meant that they had turned to wealthier Jews for loans. And the wealthier Jews and "nobles" had taken advantage them, charging usurious interest rates. Some of the poor had to mortgage their property. Others have had to give their own children as bonded laborers just to get money for adequate food, and some have sold their daughters to be second wives for wealthy men. And as if this suffering were not severe enough, with the high interest rates, and ever-burdensome taxes, these poor families were also sinking deeper and deeper into debt. They come to Nehemiah with bitter tears, pouring out their complaints and distress.

And how does Nehemiah respond? With righteous anger. He confronts the oppression by the nobles against these impoverished Jews. He calls a public meeting of the nobles and brings to light their usury and callousness. He "calls a spade a spade." That's what advocates do. They bring the darkness of abuse, suffering, injustice, and poverty to the light of day so that people can see it. Advocates take what is hidden in secret and reveal it so that help can come, so that God's love—the light of Christ in the hands and feet of His church--can help and heal and restore.

There are many dark corners of the world. Think about the genocide in Darfur, the many Pakistanis surviving winter with only a tent, the children who are growing up as orphans because their parents have died of HIV/AIDS. Yet, despite all this darkness, often we in America live our lives without seeing it. We can choose to go about our daily routines, oblivious to the pain and suffering that is going on every day, all over the world. Ef-

fective advocates, by contrast, take those dark places of the world and bring the light of Christ to them so that the church can see and work to end the injustices and suffering.

CONCLUSION

God used Nehemiah in powerful ways, and he enjoyed success: by the end of chapter 6, the city wall is rebuilt! But notice that this is not the end of the story—there are seven more chapters in the book of Nehemiah. What happens in the second half of the book? The answer is something that Food for the Hungry is passionate about: holistic ministry.

It is important to see that God’s servant Nehemiah was concerned for both the physical and the spiritual health of the Jews. We see this in the last seven chapters of the book, which concern the spiritual restoration of the city. Nehemiah knew the city needed far more than just a new wall. The people needed to be spiritually “rebuilt” as well. And so Nehemiah works with Ezra the priest to revive the Jews, holding a solemn assembly and a public reading of the Law. Nehemiah calls the Jews to a renewed commitment to love their covenant God.

What was true about the needs of the Jews of Nehemiah’s time is true for our own lives, and for the lives of the people all over the world where Food for the Hungry works. We are whole people—with bodies and souls. Recognizing this, Food for the Hungry ministers holistically, caring for both the physical and spiritual needs of the poor around the world. And that’s an important part of what will make your advocacy qualitatively different from secular advocacy for the poor. Effective advocates know that people suffer from both spiritual and physical poverty, and that’s why they advocate for responses that meet both the hunger of the body and the soul. Thanks for joining us at Food for the Hungry to show God’s deep love for the whole person.

(FOOTNOTES)

1 Spencer Johnson, *The Value of Kindness: the Story of Elizabeth Fry* (La Jolla, California: Value Communications Inc. Publishers, 1976) 61.

2 Gary Haugen *Good News About Injustice* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 55-57.

3 Nancy Gibbs, “Persons of the Year,” *Time Magazine* 26 Dec. 2005/2 Jan. 2006: 45.

4 Stats from?

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