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Advocacy v. activism: both/and, not either/or

by Kate Childs Graham

Over this past year, the movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights has seen great successes mixed with a few setbacks. Yes, California did not go as we had hoped, but Iowa and Vermont pulled through and now allow same-sex marriage. We are hoping the same can be said for Maine in the coming months. We are still waiting on President Barack Obama to end "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," but we were thrilled when he extended benefits to domestic partners of federal employees.

There is certainly much to celebrate, but we still have a long way to go. California's Prop 8 energized the masses and now more than ever the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, or LGBT, community and allies are rallying for change. To capitalize on this renewed energy, activists are planning a National Equality March in Washington on Columbus Day weekend.

But not everyone involved in the LGBT rights movement is behind this march. Those opposed to the march, such as Toni Broaddus of Equality Federation, the national alliance of state-based equality groups, think that the LGBT movement's time, energy and money could be better spent on changing legislation rather than bolstering public support. They think that this march, scheduled to take place on a weekend when legislators will be in recess, is untimely and unnecessary. Basically, for them, it comes down to a question of advocacy versus activism.

This argument has escalated over the past few months in the LGBT movement -- and the past few decades in other civil rights movements. And while some organizations and individuals are taking stances at one polar end or another, many are asking "Why not both?" And, why not?

The movement for LGBT rights alone gives us ample examples as to why we need to change the minds and hearts of both legislators and citizens. When legislators are swayed to do the right thing, we get Vermont, we get Connecticut. When people are unconvinced, we get California or worse, we get Laramie.

Certainly, advocacy is a vital aspect to creating change in this country. We need laws that ensure equal rights in all matters for all people. And the way to do that is through advocacy. It's through picking up the phone and calling, writing letters and scheduling meetings with your legislators. It's about supporting the laws that need supporting and blocking the ones that do not bring about true justice.

However, advocacy would be nothing without activism and vice versa. Activists are able to get to the minds and hearts of everyday citizens. And history has shown that change has become possible not only when brave legislators stand behind unpopular legislation, though that certainly has happened, but mainly when citizens call for change and legislators heed the calls of their constituents.

As a hopeless Trinitarian, I'd argue that there is a third piece to bringing about real change: direct service. Here, too, the LGBT community has examples. LGBT youth around the country are experiencing discrimination, isolation and sometimes even abuse. Centers and programs for LGBT youth have sprung up around the country to support these young people. Certainly, these centers and other places like them are in need of volunteers to lend their hands to supporting these youth. Service is just one more way to bring about change by impacting lives directly.

Together, by marching and lobbying, by changing hearts and changing legislation, by serving those who need it most, I have hope that change will come about for the LGBT community and our country as a whole. The key word being "together." We cannot risk division over debates over which came first, the chicken or the egg, legislation or public support. We must support each other's strengths and passions -- whether those are in advocacy, activism or service -- knowing that we share the same vision for the future.

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