

Advocating for Others in the Workplace as Policies and Culture Evolve

“How do you advocate for others in your workplace? Who are those you advocate for? Why?”

This month’s BELIEVES session on Tuesday, Feb. 13th focused on “Advocating for Others in the Workplace as Policies and Culture Evolves” asked these questions and more – informed by insights from David Schaefer, the Latin American Association’s Managing Director of Advocacy; and Greg Hare, Atlanta Office Managing Shareholder for Ogletree Deakins.



Schaefer, whose dad is from South America, and mother is from the United States, indicated 95% of the LAA’s clients live below the poverty line.

“They are fleeing violence, or facing other significant things. They have no home to go back to.”

Hare, who has lived in Atlanta for 26 years, been a part of the Cathedral of Christ the King for 24 years, and has spent his entire career with Ogletree Deakins, said that when he first engages with clients, the clients start by asking “what does the law say?”

“Then it becomes a discussion around ‘What can I do?’ followed by ‘What should I do?’” Most companies I work with strive to do the right thing, in addition to the lawful thing, when handling HR issues.

Schaefer and Hare were then asked when they look in the faces of those they advocate for, what do they see and how do they see God in the midst.

“The real risk is that you speak on behalf of those who haven’t spoken,” said Schaefer.

He further stated, “John Stott wrote, ‘It is there, at the foot of the cross that we shrink to our true size’ finding our human ideas are petty and pathetic. In this I am reminded we all need a Savior. As long as I am submitted then I see God’s face in theirs. I am in need of that constant grounding.”

Schaefer went on to share that recently those from the Latin American Association – Atlanta’s largest social services provider for Latinos – have been in Washington, DC, with all the focus on DACA and immigration. He observed that the halls of power aren’t always looking out for the best interests of humanity.

“Jesus is always constantly replacing one thing for another – like stepping in between God and sin,” Schaefer commented with reflections turning more to faith. “The question I am left with continually is, ‘Am I connected with the Father appropriately?’”

Then Hare added these insights.

“With all that’s going on in our society, it’s become OK to be a jerk to others we disagree with. That’s just not OK,” Hare said. “10% of life is what happens, 90% of life is about how we deal with what happened – and often things don’t go our way. Everyone must deal with sometimes losing, when things don’t go our way – and learning how to deal with it, to deal with loss. In our current culture, if things don’t go our way, people resort to finger pointing ... the blame game. That cannot continue. It’s not healthy.”

When Hare was growing up in church, he said there were stories that he heard as a kid that he now hears 30 years later and they sound different.

“The Pharisees and Sadducees were the ones promoting the most hateful ideas, and insisting that their followers abide by man-made dogma and rules,” Hare stated. “What did Jesus do? He hung around with the people they didn’t like. Today, in university settings, rather than maturely having dialogue, students are being taught how to not talk with those who disagree with them and not deal with things. In the real world, there is adversity.”

Schaefer then added, “Those we serve are just struggling and trying to survive – sharing an apartment with 10 people, or putting a sheet down the middle and having a family on each side. There’s not much time to reflect. Though they don’t always reflect upon the larger system, it impacts them. Young Latina females have the highest suicide rate in the country – 15%. While there’s public discourse, there’s real life going on that is separate. We, those who do not wrestle everyday with poverty, have the luxury of debating what we do with things like immigration, but our conversations need to be far more inclusive of others.”

CTK parishioner John Ribka then asked, “How do you advocate – both the legal and human side?”

Schaefer responded, “In tax, the assumption is income is taxable so you have to prove it’s not. In immigration, the assumption is that you are deportable. From a faith-based side, there’s a question of ‘what is right.’”

Then he added, “We’ve had asylum claims for as young as a two-year-old boy. How does a two-year-old get to the border? But he does. Atlanta’s one of the toughest places for asylum. We’ve had asylum cases denied and then what was said would happen to the person happens – the person is killed.”

Finally, Schaefer said with a deep reflection on faith, “If the vertical relationship on the cross is correct, the horizontal will be too.”

Hare commented, “So much of what you described is about people who don’t have choice. We’re talking about two polar opposites – people living in a scenario where they have the luxury of making choices, but on the other end are those that are looking to survive. When people grow up, the people living in the comfortable and economically-advantaged scenarios will be decision-makers making decisions impacting those that are looking to survive. We need to get them to reflect on the real world circumstances, and the impact their decisions have on one another.”



When then asked what inhibits him and others most from advocating for others in the workplace on three levels – culturally, organizationally, and personally – Schaefer had this to say.

“We’re always told to obey, but in obedience we raise a petition for change. You cannot leave people in perpetual disobedience. There has to be a way to get right with the law. I think too often in this culture, we focus on ‘you’re right and you’re not’, but offer people with no reasonable path by which to move forward.”

With Schaefer concluding his remarks to the question about what inhibits advocacy for others, the hour-long session neared the time to close, so the panelists shared some closing remarks.

“Many of the most vocal commentators are guilty of identity politics,” Hare stated. “This is the antithesis of what anti-discrimination laws are all about. When stereotype is interjected, it leads to bad outcomes. It undoes all the positive change that the laws intended. We have to have some rules to have structure in our society, but rules should be informed by the goodness of God.”

Schafer commented, "I hope we can return faith to the conversation. The zero-sum game is not God's economy. That's not in the Bible, and we need to encourage our leadership to turn from this. In God's economy, He says, 'I own it all. I can give jobs to whomever. My promise is to you, and I'll take care of you.'"

Then Schaefer shared, "I am most deeply disturbed not by the state of our nation, but the state of our churches. I think broadening context in this discussion is key. We are all imperfect people, wrestling with an imperfect system."