

## **A Unique Faith-based Advocacy Ministry: Providing a Voice of Conscience for State Legislators**

**By  
Larry Struve, RAIN Advocate**

The Religious Alliance in Nevada (RAIN) has since 1997 provided an advocate in the Nevada Legislature to speak up for the care of those who are least able to speak for themselves or who have the least basic necessities of life. RAIN is an alliance of five Christian denominations (Lutheran, Catholic, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Methodist), the members of which are motivated by an understanding of faith that requires more than a personal relationship to the divine. Justice, love of neighbor, compassion, reconciliation, and serving others (especially the poor) are at the heart of God's message in Scripture. RAIN engages in public advocacy, so that these principles are reflected in public policy.

Notwithstanding the difficult budget situation in 2011, RAIN supported several important pieces of legislation that eventually were passed by the Legislature.

- A bill of rights for children in foster care was adopted; and
- An interim study of laws governing the protection of children was authorized.
- Victims of human trafficking were given the opportunity to have their convictions for prostitution or pandering expunged from their records, if they could prove these crimes resulted from being victims of human trafficking.
- A pilot diversion program was established within the Nevada Dept. of Corrections in which probation violators who need structured supervision or treatment can be diverted to an intermediate sanctions facility rather than being sent back to prison for long terms at great expense to taxpayers.
- Persons convicted of felonies who have completed their sentences or been granted an honorable discharge from probation or parole would have been able to have their voting rights restored, but the ***Governor vetoed the bill.***
- A bill calling for an audit of Nevada's death penalty was passed but ***disapproved by the Governor***; and
- A bill requiring the implementation of school meal programs at certain public schools and the compilation of statistics on the utilization of child nutrition dollars in Nevada made it out of the Legislature but ***was also vetoed.***

Perhaps the most notable accomplishment of RAIN in the 2011 Nevada Legislature was the passage and signing into law of a bill that would waive the fees charged for duplicate identification cards issued by the Dept. of Motor Vehicles to ex-offenders being released back into society. The legislation also requires the Director of the Dept. of Corrections to provide assistance and information to inmates on how to obtain proper identification before they leave prison.

Getting a valid identification card (ID) may sound like an easy thing to do for most people; but for someone who has spent many years incarcerated, it is not. It costs upwards of \$50.00 to obtain a valid ID in Nevada, and most ex-offenders released back into society do not have this kind of money. Thus, many cannot or do not bother to obtain one. Without a valid identification card, ex-offenders usually cannot obtain employment. They cannot get adequate housing. They cannot qualify for basic services such as health care, food stamps, job training, or other services needed to help them make the transition from prison life to the outside world. If these people cannot take these needed steps to successfully re-enter society, they will be unable to pay restitution to their victims or provide child support for their families or cover the supervision fees required by the State to keep track of them. When ex-offenders find themselves confronted with these insurmountable obstacles, they return to their old ways of surviving, which often means committing more crimes and being sent back to prison for long prison terms, which cost taxpayers approximately \$20,000 a year per inmate. Recidivism has become a problem that affects society as a whole. When it reaches levels of 65-70% as it has in some states, it becomes a significant issue for state legislatures, because growing prison budgets often require cuts in education and basic services needed by poor and disadvantaged people. Thus, assuring that all released inmates have valid IDs is a major step toward meaningful reform and reduced recidivism; and fortunately Nevada legislators in 2011 made this connection.

Getting the legislation passed to waive fees for issuing duplicate identification cards by the Department of Motor Vehicles was the result of a team effort and some unanticipated opportunities that opened up in the final days of the 2011 session. Both John Cracchiolo, lobbyist for the Nevada Catholic Conference, and Larry Struve, RAIN Advocate, believe something was at work affecting the hearts and minds of legislators who were familiar with the bill and the need of ex-offenders to have proper identification in order to successfully reenter society. Notwithstanding the fact that this legislation could result in reduced fees being collected by the Department of Motor Vehicles from ex offenders and requiring revenues from elsewhere in the State budget to make up the difference, legislators did the right thing and passed it, and the Governor signed it. Could it be that the advocacy efforts on behalf of RAIN allowed the Holy Spirit to touch the hearts and minds of these lawmakers?

On August 23, 2011, Larry Struve and John Cracchiolo provided an overview of the 2011 Session to the RAIN Board of Directors. They shared what they had learned and made some suggestions for future planning to help preserve this unique ministry in Nevada. At the Board's request, this article summarizes the recommendations presented, so that those who support this program can consider ways to help it grow and prosper.

**Five policy** recommendations related to RAIN's advocacy activity were presented:

**First, the Board should welcome a team approach to advocacy as an effective tool in affecting the legislative process.** Utilizing the talents of more than one person to represent the different facets of the RAIN coalition makes a favorable impression on lawmakers, especially

when the team members are interacting in a collegial, cooperative manner, so that a united front is presented. In 2011, Larry Struve viewed his job as presenting the “big picture” on particular bills, explaining why RAIN was supportive of a particular legislative action and emphasizing the social justice issues that were at stake. John Cracchiolo became adept at approaching individual legislators and seeking their support on particular bills of interest to RAIN and the Catholic Conference of Nevada. Such a combination worked well. And, if other judicatories in the RAIN coalition had sent registered lobbyists to the Session (as has been done on occasion in the past), they would have been welcomed as part of the team effort. As it was, **the results summarized above were achieved with only a two man effort, which in retrospect turned out to be a very effective strategy.** If there were disagreements among the judicatories comprising RAIN on specific bills or issues, RAIN took a neutral position, and thereby preserved the appearance of a united front when advocating for bills on which there was unanimity of opinion.

**Second**, given the unpredictability and dynamism of Nevada legislative sessions, the Board was encouraged to allow as much flexibility as possible on the part of persons representing the RAIN coalition. At first, the Board tried to give prior approval to specific proposals or actions to be taken in the name of RAIN at the Legislature. However, it quickly became apparent that this approach was not feasible. Delay in responding to e mails, failure to respond, rapidly changing events at the Legislature, and infrequent monthly meetings of the Board made it impossible to discern what a majority of the Board would do in a variety of situations. Larry Struve and John Cracchiolo made good faith attempts to check in with individual RAIN Board members to receive direction, but in the end, they had to use their discretion in deciding whether to speak up for RAIN on particular matters. As a result of this experience, **it was recommended that Board members should, as a matter of policy, select advocates who they trust to use good judgment in making decisions on what specific bills to support, the timing for engaging in advocacy functions, and the discretion to pick the persons and coalition partners with whom they will cooperate on lobbying activities, provided such work is consistent with RAIN policies, statements, and the precepts of member denominations.**

**Third**, no matter how well lobbyists have prepared for legislative hearings and meetings, RAIN’s advocates in 2011 were always confronted with surprises, disappointments, and unanticipated opportunities to be witnesses to the basic beliefs supported by all RAIN denominations. They would get commitments from legislators to do one thing, and when some of these legislators went on the floor of the Assembly or Senate they would do the opposite thing. For example, a conservative State Senator, who was a good Christian and member of a mainline Church, had agreed to support a bill to restore voting rights to ex-felons who had paid their debt to society. The Senator voted for the bill in committee. However, when it was presented on the floor of the Nevada Senate, the legislator was under pressure to change her vote. She asked to meet with RAIN Advocate Larry Struve to talk about this bill and to clarify why RAIN was supporting it. During their meeting, Larry mentioned Matthew 25, verses 36, 39, and 40, in which Jesus said, to the amazement of his disciples, that when he was in prison they came

and visited him (which none of the disciples remembered doing.) As Jesus explained, whenever Christians do such good deeds “to the least of these,” they have done it to him. Larry further explained to the Senator that RAIN represents Christian denominations who fervently believe in human redemption. When legislation like the one restoring voting rights to those who have paid their debt to society is considered by the Legislature, RAIN is obligated to speak in favor of such a compassionate bill. It represents a commitment by government to protect every citizen’s right of franchise whenever possible, thereby carrying out restorative justice, as supported by many Christian faith organizations. The Senator thanked Larry for his explanation and indicated she needed to hear these words, because of her Christian faith. Though she ultimately voted against the bill, the moment she spared to consider Jesus’s words in the Gospel of Matthew was a “Holy Spirit” moment. The Senator finally understood why RAIN was engaged in advocacy at the Legislature and at some point in the future may again consider what she learned in the 2011 Session.

In looking toward future legislative sessions, advocates for RAIN should expect surprises, disappointments, and unanticipated opportunities to occur when they are in the legislative “arena.” **The Board was encouraged to let its advocates seize the moment and follow their best instincts in dealing with such situations, because it could well be that in those moments the Holy Spirit itself is at work.**

The **fourth** policy recommended was **allowing the advocates for RAIN to choose how to wisely allocate their time and effort at the Legislature, so that their overall work is not dissipated on relatively unimportant matters but instead is focused either on issues of major concern to the faith communities comprising RAIN or on matters that will increase the impact of RAIN on the legislative process.** This requires a balancing of the demands on an advocate’s time. It would be difficult to devise a formula to govern how time in advocacy should be spent. It is not a 9 to 5 job. Oftentimes, nothing happens in the Legislature in an entire day. Other times, so much is happening that an advocate cannot be in all the places he needs to be. It is also possible to observe legislative activities via the internet, obviating the necessity of incurring travel expenses to go to the Capitol in Carson City. The Nevada Legislature’s web site is an excellent resource in monitoring bills and scheduling legislative visits. To be an effective advocate, one must make judgment calls on how best to utilize the time and the resources available to keep track of the bills of most concern to RAIN. Board members have traditionally given discretion to the RAIN Advocate in deciding how best to allocate these resources; and as a policy matter, the Board was urged to continue encouraging such persons to use their time wisely, refraining from fruitless activity when engaged in the legislative process.

And finally, the **fifth** recommendation was as follows: **RAIN should reaffirm in each legislative session that the purpose of advocacy is to serve as a witness for the disadvantaged and vulnerable people of the State of Nevada and to raise up a prophetic voice for the common good, social justice, and for everyone’s civic and moral responsibility**

**to act in the best interests of his or her neighbor.** Advocates for RAIN should be wary of keeping score of wins and losses or doing what may seem necessary at the moment only to lose credibility and influence over the long term at the Legislature. Both Larry Struve and John Cracchiolo tried to maintain their focus on this objective in 2011. They accepted their losses gracefully but did not waiver from the purpose for which they were sent, i.e. to be a witness and a voice in the legislative process for the common good and social justice.

**Two dynamic observations shared with RAIN's board:**

By the end of the 2011 Session, many legislators had accepted the fact that RAIN was serving a unique role completely different from that of other paid lobbyists. It was not concerned with profits, protecting corporate interests, or pursuing objectives driven by the self-interest of a few. Rather, RAIN was perceived as a diverse group of faith-centered Nevadans who collectively acted as a moral conscience giving voice to the needs of the common good in legislative deliberations. Its advocates were asked for the positions of the faith communities represented, not because RAIN was being forced into the role of power broker but because legislators genuinely wanted to know what some faith communities in Nevada would think about particular issues. RAIN also helped some legislators figure out how to get legislation passed, even after bills appeared to be dead, as occurred with the bill that will allow ex-offenders to obtain duplicate identification cards without having to pay a fee. As noted by John Cracchiolo, legislators are average citizens, most of whom have jobs in the private and public sectors but little experience in the legislative arena. They look to groups like RAIN for guidance and help in getting legislation moved, especially in the hectic final days of a session.

Some of RAIN's success was also based on its willingness to work with all parties in the Legislature, whether in the majority or minority, and to cooperate with other lobbyists and groups that had similar objectives. The Governor's Office welcomed RAIN representatives in 2011, which was a big help in solving problems and identifying issues to be resolved before bills supported by RAIN reached the Governor's desk. In this regard, the Governor's Office was briefed by RAIN and subsequently approved a temporary regulation of the Department of Public Safety soon after the Legislature adjourned, thereby allowing the NV Department of Corrections to utilize over \$16,000 raised by RAIN from 2009-2011 and deposited in a special revenue account called the Reentry Fund, which was established in the 2009 NV Legislative Session as a result of RAIN's advocacy efforts. This money was given by parishioners in RAIN churches on the condition that these contributions would cover the cost of issuing valid identification cards to newly released inmates, if they could not otherwise obtain one. The temporary regulation will assure that the money will be used for the purpose for which it was given.

**In summary: a biblical message of hope**

Perhaps the most compelling argument to maintain a faith-based advocacy effort for good government in Nevada was stated by the prophet Isaiah many centuries ago. Consider the words

in Isaiah 32, verses 1 – 8, New Century Version (NCV) of the Holy Bible:

**“A Good Kingdom Is Coming**

<sup>1</sup> A king will rule in a way that brings justice,  
and leaders will make fair decisions.

<sup>2</sup> Then each ruler will be like a shelter from the wind,  
like a safe place in a storm,  
like streams of water in a dry land,  
like a cool shadow from a large rock in a hot land.

<sup>3</sup> People will look to the king for help,  
and they will truly listen to what he says.

<sup>4</sup> People who are now worried will be able to understand.  
Those who cannot speak clearly now will then be able to speak clearly and quickly.

<sup>5</sup> Fools will not be called great,  
and people will not respect the wicked.

<sup>6</sup> A fool says foolish things,  
and in his mind he plans evil.  
A fool does things that are wicked,  
and he says wrong things about the LORD.  
A fool does not feed the hungry  
or let thirsty people drink water.

<sup>7</sup> The wicked person uses evil like a tool.  
He plans ways to take everything from the poor.  
He destroys the poor with lies,  
even when the poor person is in the right.

<sup>8</sup> But a good leader plans to do good,  
and those good things make him a good leader.”

This is a message of hope. For those who believe that Isaiah foretold the coming of Christ himself, they also must surely believe that after Christ came, there would be hope for a transformation (as predicted in the passage above) in the way people viewed society and those who ruled them. In America, Christians have traditionally believed that good government is possible and that those in positions of power and influence have the potential to be wise and just leaders, protecting the poor and doing what the common good requires. Advocacy is a means by which Christians can be a public witness to that end, gently persuading legislators to listen to their hearts and minds and to always strive to do what is right not only for themselves but for their neighbors. It is the building block on which civic virtue is based and should again be a facet of American culture respected by all citizens.