

Annoying allies

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I turned the knob of the radio until I could hear the public station. It was a local program, a prolonged piece on a mother talking about the fear and anticipation of her son, a "[shavee](#)." I admit. I rolled my eyes.

It was a story about a teen boy who shaved his head in solidarity with his friend who had cancer. It was lovely thing to do, of course. Yet it was the second program I had heard on the trauma of this advocate who got a haircut. "Where's the boy with cancer?" I muttered at the radio as I turned it off. "Where's his mom? What's his story?"

It's a common experience when an ally gets more attention than the person who's going through the actual trauma. It happens in the church all the time. I often hear backlash.

About a year ago, as [this story](#) was breaking, a prominent lesbian pastor got angry with me on Twitter for placing the spotlight on a straight ally instead of the LGBTQ couples who fought for marriage equality. I immediately apologized and asked her for patience with me.

I have to say, I haven't advocated for marriage equality since then. Not that I meant to drop the cause. It's just that I have a lot of things to write. I became worried about squelching the voices of those who were being directly affected by our legal system and excluded from our religious covenants. After years of active advocacy, I started writing about other things. It was easy to benignly neglect it. After all, as a result of my positions, I've lost friends and the affection of family members. I've lost jobs. I've lost publishing opportunities. (Please understand me. I'm not any sort of martyr. My paltry losses are nothing in comparison to LGBT ministers and couples who are discriminated against day in and day out.)

Now I wonder if I did the right thing. For instance, in my denomination, the definition of marriage is between a man and a woman. I, like many in the PC(USA), would like

for that definition to be changed to include same-sex couples. We cannot solely rely on the voices of LGBTQ persons to make sure that an alternative definition gets passed, because the ordination of LGBTQ people has been a recent decision. Pragmatically, they need straight allies.

And if a person is accepted in a system—whether it be legal or religious—doesn't she have a duty to listen as closely as she can to those who are excluded and fight for those who are not accepted in the system? I know that as a woman minister, I am not accepted in the majority of Christian circles. I appreciate the men who have unlocked the door and handed me the key. Now that I have some voice and privilege, how is that best used?

And what about the larger issues? When I spend energy getting annoyed with the mother of the teen advocate, am I losing perspective on the bigger issue of cancer?

I am not saying that the minister didn't have the right to be annoyed with me. She certainly did. It was a wake-up call for me as I keep sorting out how to keep moving forward, listening closely, being responsible with the little bit of power that I have. Yet, it also reminds me of the ultimate goal of making room so that people can speak for themselves.