

How To Be an Effective Advocate

“I think the ‘church lobby’ continually reminds political leaders of an alternative vision, one based on other factors besides self-interest—e.g. needs of the hungry, human rights...”

“My state’s delegation is very closed-minded but I keep writing because I want them to know there are other ways to think about most things.”

“My Members of Congress are close to my views, so the responses I get from them confirm what I express in my letters. Maybe it helps them to know we agree.”

“I do feel many letters can make a difference.”

—Comments by Presbyterian advocates participating in Washington Office Programs.



...Making our voices heard!

Our lawmakers’ votes are influenced by their personal views, their party’s positions, the advice of staff and friends, and lobbyists. **But the single most important influence is constituent opinion.** Members of Congress rely on the letters, phone calls, e-mails, faxes and visits they receive to gauge how the voters in their district are thinking. As one former Representative said, “It’s a basic political rule: no Congressperson wants to write back thousands of constituents saying that he doesn’t agree with them.”

The Presbyterian Washington Office provides services that help Presbyterians express their concerns to people in government in a timely and effective way. This can help make a difference in the kinds of laws, policies and actions our government supports.

The Witness in Washington Weekly message program provides timely information on public policy advocacy opportunities. If you join WiWW, you will receive bulletins with analysis and specific suggestions for actions you can take to influence policy on the issue you’ve chosen.

In addition to the WiWW, the Office sponsors a program of issue briefings and congressional visits for groups of Presbyterians visiting Washington. After you return home, we can help you track your issue and learn the outcome of your efforts. For late-breaking bulletins and legislative action, along with links to your Member, see our web site: www.pcusa.org/washington.

Through effective contacts with decision-makers, Presbyterians can lift up the Church’s vision of a just and compassionate society.

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*All work of the Presbyterian Washington Office
is based upon General Assembly Policy.*

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Letter Writing

Many people feel that letters, faxes and e-mails don't make a difference. But a well-written, well-informed, **personal** letter from a voter in the lawmaker's district can indeed have an influence.

Your letter works two ways. First, it **educates**. Members of Congress must take positions on hundreds of issues; typically, they are well informed about only a few of them. They depend heavily on aides for summaries of information. Thought provoking letters may shape the thinking of aides and thereby influence a Member of Congress.

Second, it **persuades**. Aides keep a running tally of letters, faxes and e-mails received for and against a given position. Although Members do not usually read individual correspondence, they do receive mail counts, by subject and attitude. Sometimes just a few faxes, e-mails or letters are received on a given subject, and in that case even one can be important.

Tips for Writing

- Be brief. Express your opinion in a few paragraphs or even a few sentences, making clear what you are asking the lawmaker to do. Long, complicated communications are unlikely to be read all the way through by the Member's busy staff.
- It's fine to send along one or two pieces of supporting material, such as an article from a local paper in the Member's district.
- If sending a letter, a neatly handwritten note is best. Otherwise, type. Check your spelling.

“Our presbytery approved a statement calling for U.S. restraint on Iraq. That statement ... calls upon President George W. Bush and Congressional leaders to guard against unilateralism, rooted in our unique position of political, economic and military power.”

- State your own views in your own words. Form letters or postcards which appear generated by a mail campaign receive less attention than a personal note.
- Be positive and polite. If possible, begin by thanking the legislator for a past vote or action that you approved of.
- Address only one issue in a fax, e-mail or letter. If possible, give the bill number and/or title. Let the lawmaker know precisely what you'd like him or her to do (for example, co-sponsor a bill, oppose or support certain amendments, vote for or against the bill when it comes to the floor).
- Draw on personal or local experience whenever possible to support your stand. Mention conditions or events in the Member's district that relate to the legislation you're discussing.
- Ask questions. Thoughtful inquiries may prompt the Member's staff to look into the issue more deeply in order to answer you.
- Time and target your contact. Early in the session, a note raising an issue in general terms may be appropriate. Later, time your faxes and e-mails to the progress of specific bills. Write to committee members soon after a bill has been referred to their committee. When the bill is sent to the floor of either chamber, write to your Representative or Senators.
- Be sure to put your return address and e-mail address on any communication.
- Be prepared for a less-than-satisfying response. Lawmakers' offices often send the same letter in reply to all constituents who write on a given topic, usually amounting to little more than a bland restatement of the Member's views. This does not mean your effort had no impact. Especially if many comments were received on the same topic, it may even have prodded the lawmaker to rethink his or her position or vote. Watch to see what the Member does on the issue you are concerned about, then follow up. If you approve, write a short note of thanks. If you disapprove, let the Member know you are disappointed and restate your expectations.

E-mail and Fax

Fax and e-mail have gained popularity as ways to communicate with Congress, particularly since the 2001 anthrax attacks. **Sending a fax** gets your message there fast—as fast as a phone call—and yet provides a written record of the communication. Though some offices do not give out their fax number publicly, in most cases it is a direct and valid way to communicate

Members of Congress have public **e-mail** boxes that may be accessed by constituents. Certain House and Senate committees also have them. E-mails now get as much attention as do letters, faxes or phone calls. They are easy to send—so easy that the Member's e-mailbox may be crowded with junk mail. If you send an e-mail message, include your postal mail address to show that you are in the Member's district and to enable the office to send you a reply.

Delores Jones
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Any City, USA
202-555-1212
email: djones@email.com

The Honorable _____
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

I am writing to urge you to support the Hunger Relief Act (H.R. 3192/S. 1805). This crucial legislation would help to address a serious problem plaguing millions of children and adults—widespread hunger and food insecurity.

The bill would target Food Stamp Program improvements to ensure more adequate nutrition assistance to at-risk groups, especially needy legal immigrants and low-income households with children, including working families and families with high shelter costs. It also would provide greater resources through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) for those families turning to food pantries and other emergency feeding programs.

Recent studies have shown that hunger continues to be a significant problem in the United States. Last year, more than 20 million Americans sought emergency food assistance from food banks, kitchens and shelters. Almost four million children under the age of 12 go to bed hungry every night.

The Presbyterian Church (USA), of which I am a member, has strongly supported government programs that fight domestic hunger. The Church has a humanitarian concern for all the children of God who suffer from hunger and poor nutrition.

Passage of the Hunger Relief Act is a much needed step toward alleviating hunger in America. When this bill reaches a vote in the Senate, please support it.

Sincerely yours,

Delores Jones

Specific and personal correspondence from constituents makes a difference.

Visiting Your Legislators

You can arrange a visit to a lawmaker's local or Washington office. Locally, you should be able to meet with the Member of Congress when he or she is in the home district during a congressional recess. For maximum impact, organize a delegation that includes representatives of several groups in your community.

In Washington, your interview will most likely be with an aide on the Member's staff. This does not mean that the meeting is less effective. Aides brief their Member of Congress on the issues. They write his or her speeches, and in many cases recommend how the Member should vote.

To schedule a visit, write or phone ahead, preferably at least two weeks in advance. State the groups you represent, the issue you wish to discuss, how many people will attend, and your preferred dates for visiting. Confirm the date with a letter.

“I have come to Washington with my presbytery’s advocacy team. I think the ongoing relationship—especially with Senators—make them aware of our witness to peace and justice.”

Plan ahead. Research in advance the current status of the legislation, the different sides of the argument, and the Member's voting record and committee assignments. If several of you will be making the visit, have a strategy session. Plan the points you will stress and who will take the lead; agree on questions you will ask and materials you will bring. Assume you will have only 10 minutes to make your case. If you are given more time, you can expand the topic.

When you begin a conversation with your legislator or an aide, introduce yourselves as constituents and mention any organizations that you represent.

Briefly share your experience or credentials relevant to the issue you want to discuss. Comment on a past vote of the Member, thanking him or her, if possible, for a vote or action you favored.

“Our Congresswoman knows me and listens to what I have to say when I go to her local office.”

State the purpose of your visit. Explain your position succinctly, and request specific actions that you want your legislator to take (e.g. co-sponsor a bill, vote for or against a measure in committee or on the floor). Ask what the lawmaker plans to do. Be persistent and polite.

One person should take notes during the conversation, being sure to write down any commitments made by the legislator or aide.

Afterward, send a letter thanking the Member of Congress for the meeting. Briefly recap your position and your understanding of any commitments made during the meeting.

The Presbyterian Washington Office offers assistance to Presbyterians who wish to visit their Members of Congress in Washington. The office hosts a program of issue briefings and congressional visits on the second Tuesday of each month. Participants make afternoon appointments with their Representative and Senators, or their aides. Before keeping the appointment, they come to the Washington Office for a morning briefing on selected issues and tips on how to make an effective visit to Congress. Contact the Washington Office to schedule a Second Tuesday briefing (briefings for groups can be arranged on other dates as well).

“How do you tell that you have made a difference? If I am informed and in contact with one or more Congress members, I can have faith that probably something I do or say will make a difference.”

Using the Telephone

Telephoning your Senator or Representative is another way to communicate your opinion. If you call the home office, ask the staffer who takes your message to pass it on to the Washington office. A more effective approach is to call the Washington office directly and ask to speak with the legislative aide who deals with your issue. Or you can do both.

Prepare for the conversation in advance, jotting down the points you want to make. When you reach your listener, identify yourself as a constituent. Be pleasant and come to the point quickly. Ask how the Member intends to vote on the issue, and state exactly what you want the legislator to do.

Telephoning is useful when time is short. It is especially effective just before an important vote. On the other hand, writing costs less and provides a written record. Writing also allows you to provide supporting material, such as an article or report.

- To reach the Washington office of any Member of Congress or any congressional committee, phone the

Capitol switchboard: (202) 224-3121

Ask for the office you want by name. You can also find out the Member's direct phone or fax number in Washington by calling his or her local office.

- To express your opinion of an Administration action, phone the

**White House comment line: (202) 456-1111
or fax the White House: (202) 456-2461**

Although individual messages are not relayed to the President, the White House pays attention to the volume of public response—for and against—especially following a major presidential speech or action.

“I called my Congressman’s office—registered my opinion which was different from his. Had four points ready to give to staffer; she wrote it down. It may not have made a difference but my points were in there!”

How to Get a Copy of a Bill

The Library of Congress operates its own research service, where the public can access information on legislation, can obtain copies of bills, and can check the status of specific proposals. See <http://thomas.loc.gov>. Don't have a computer? You can obtain copies of bills or committee reports by contacting the House and Senate document rooms. Ask for the bill by number, and be sure to include your mailing address and telephone number. Orders are usually filled the day they are received and go out via U.S. mail. There is no charge.

House Document Room
B-18 Annex 2
Washington, D.C. 20515

Fax: (202) 226-4362

Telephone: (202) 226-5200

Senate Document Room
SH-B 04
Washington, D.C. 20510

Fax: (202) 228-2815

Telephone: (202) 224-7860, for information only. *The Senate document room does not accept telephone requests.*

To learn the status of bills in the Senate or House, phone (202) 225-1772.

Letters to the Editor and Op-Eds

Letters to the editor are among the most widely read features of newspapers. A metropolitan daily may have one to two million readers. Small town papers are widely read and influential in their areas. When your letter appears on the editorial page, you probably have the largest audience you will ever address. Moreover, Members of Congress normally read the newspaper from their district to keep tabs on issues of concern to their constituents.

To give your letter the best chance of publication:

- Type the letter, double-spaced, on only one side of the paper.
- Keep it short, less than two pages.
- Deal with only one topic. It should be timely and newsworthy. If possible, refer to a news item, editorial or letter which has appeared recently in the paper you are writing to.
- Express your thoughts clearly and concisely. A well-written letter is more likely to be published.
- Supply facts that may have been omitted or slanted in presentation of the news or editorials. You can render a service to the public by presenting views that may ordinarily be given little or no attention by the press. But avoid a hostile or sarcastic tone.
- Use a relevant personal experience to illustrate a point. If your background gives you special expertise on a subject, say so.
- Bring moral judgments to bear upon the issues. Appeal to readers' sense of justice and compassion. Challenge them to respond to the issue.
- Sign your name. Include your address and telephone number. In most cases only your name and city or town of residence will be published with the letter.

Opinion pieces (op-eds) are harder to get published than letters. In leading newspapers such as *The New York Times*, your chances of placing an op-ed are slim. Newspapers in mid-sized cities and towns offer greater possibilities. If you do get your letter into the paper, send a copy to your Member, and to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Washington Office.

An op-ed should be under 750 words (three double-spaced pages). It must be able to stand alone as a complete essay. It is important to establish how your background gives you expertise on the subject.

If your local paper's editorial position on a given issue is consistently at odds with what you believe is right, or if an important issue isn't getting covered in the paper, you may want to meet with the editors. This is most feasible if you can organize a small delegation (two or three people) that includes representatives of several groups in the community.

The guidelines for visiting congressional offices also apply here, except that you are asking for more or different news coverage rather than a vote. Prepare for the meeting carefully. Bring a selection of background materials such as fact sheets and reports from identified and credible sources to leave with the editors, along with the telephone numbers of people who can be contacted for further information.

Keep in Touch

Staying informed is crucial to effective advocacy. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) provides several types of telephone and on-line information to assist you.

The Washington Office maintains a web site at <http://www.pcusa.org/washington>. Join our Witness in Washington Weekly message for timely information and action by going to <http://capwiz.com/pcusa/mlm/signup/>

You can also send information or questions to the staff of the Presbyterian Washington Office. Use the in-box [ga_washington_office@pcusa.org](mailto:washington_office@pcusa.org). Keep us informed about your advocacy efforts.