

Making A Legislative Witness

The United Methodist Church has succinctly described the role of government and citizens' responsibility: "While our allegiance to God takes precedence over our allegiance to any state, we acknowledge the vital function of government as a principal vehicle for the ordering of society The strength of a political system depends upon the full and willing participation of its citizens. The church should continually exert a strong ethical influence upon the state, supporting policies and programs deemed to be just and opposing policies and programs that are unjust." ¶ 164, *2013-2016 Social Principles*.

As people of faith, we are called to "exert a strong ethical influence" upon our legislators and, through them, to make our government responsive, open and accountable. Below are three ways through which you can exert such influence.*

1. **Send an email to your legislators in Congress and/or the Virginia General Assembly.**

Emails do make a difference. The sheer volume of email gives legislators a sense of what their constituents are deeply concerned about. A well thought out email can also provide a legislator with helpful information and an important perspective. To be most effective, your email should address only one issue, provide accurate facts, and request that the legislator reply to let you know his or her position on the issue and what she or he is prepared to do. Inclusion of a personal story can help to put a human face on the issue.

2. **Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.**

Letters-to-the-editor are very effective – not only for drawing readers' attention to issues you care about, but also for alerting legislators to those issues. Most elected officials monitor newspapers to gauge local opinion. By mentioning your legislator by name, and stating the specific action you would like for them to take, your letter will very likely catch the attention of your legislator. Below are some tips for writing an effective letter to your local newspaper:

- **Keep it short.** Focus on a single issue. In the first paragraph state your main point and why it is important to you. In the second paragraph provide facts, quotes, and perhaps a story to illustrate the issue. In your last paragraph restate your main point, mention your legislator by name, and state what he or she should do. A letter that is concise, well organized and to the point is much more likely to be published than a longer, rambling letter. Many newspapers have a limit of 200 words.
- **Respond to a news story.** Open with a reference to a recent news story, editorial or previous letter to the editor. 'Recent' means no older than a few days.
- **Make a local connection.** Your letter will be of more interest to editors of your local paper if you spell out how action on the issue will have a local impact.
- **If possible, show how your opinion represents others as well.** For example, if you are writing about an issue on which the Virginia Annual Conference has taken an official

position, point out that what you say is not just your personal opinion but a position supported by the Virginia Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church representing over 325,000 United Methodists across the Commonwealth.

- **Consider all of your options.** Letters submitted to your local newspaper have the best chance of being published. But on some issues you may want to also consider submission to a neighborhood, regional or national paper, ethnic presses, religious publications and some magazines.

3. Make an in-person visit with your legislator. While emails and letters to the editor make a difference, legislative staff persons have repeatedly reported that in-person visits by constituents are the *most* influential way for communicating with legislators. To be useful, such visits need to be well planned. Below are four major steps for a successful visit:

- **Choose a specific action you want your legislator to take and plan your visit.** Gather information about the issue. Identify the ‘ask’ – the specific action you want your legislator to take. This should be focused on legislation and deal with only one issue. Talk to others in your community who may be interested in going with you. You may have friends who care about the same issue. There may be community leaders who have already spoken out on the issue. Visiting as a group can show the legislator there is broad support for your position, and visiting as a group can often be more effective since members can support each other in making the case to your legislator.
- **Get in touch with your legislator or their staff.** Call your legislator’s office and state that you would like to schedule a visit. Specify the issue you wish to discuss and suggest a time frame that works for you (for example, between February 2-6). If other persons will be going with you (for example, a faith leader, small business owner, school teacher, retired person, etc.), providing information about them will give your request extra weight. If your legislator is not available, you will often be able to meet with a staff person – which can sometimes be just as effective as that person passes on your request to your legislator and speaks for you. If the person you speak with is not able to give you an appointment at the time you call, don’t give up! Follow up within the next few days. Legislative offices want to hear from you – it is often simply a matter of coordinating schedules.
- **Visit your legislator!** If others are going with you, meet together before seeing your legislator and decide who will make the initial presentation and the ‘ask’, who will provide supporting facts, who will provide a personal story, and who will take notes. You may have only 10-20 minutes, so make the best use of your time: Thank your legislator or staff person for their time, seek common values, gain rapport and build a relationship. Focus on one issue and one ‘ask’. Share your experience (you don’t need to be an expert – legislators can get facts from many sources; what they will value from you as a constituent, and what they cannot get anywhere else, is why the issue matters to

you). Ask questions such as “How can I/we help you address this issue?” “Who else do you need to hear from?” It can be helpful to bring along one sheet of paper where your ‘ask’ is clearly written out, and the names and contact information for everyone in your group is provided, along with one or two fact sheets on the issue.

- **Follow up!** Congratulations – you have now completed a visit with your legislator! There are just a couple of more things you can do to make your visit as effective as possible. *First*, within a week send a thank you email to the legislator or staff person with whom you met. Summarize your ‘ask’, list who was there, provide any information they asked for, and ask any follow-up questions. *Second*, keep in touch with your legislator or any staff person with whom you met. You can become increasingly effective over time by building up a relationship with your legislator and his or her staff, and by making additional visits. You can keep in touch by sending them articles or letters to the editor on issues of concern to you, share statements from community leaders or groups, and ask for follow-up visits.

* The points outlined above are drawn substantively from the very helpful resources provided by the Friends Committee on National Legislation. For a more detailed discussion, visit <http://fcnl.org/resources/toolkit/>