



Office of Public Witness

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness
Compassion, Peace, and Justice Ministries

Raising A Prophetic Voice through the Social Justice Policy of Presbyterians since 1946

Holy Discontentment: Lifting Your Voice for Effective Advocacy

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and God will say, Here I am.*

-Isaiah 58:6-9 (NRSV)

When we read the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, there is an overwhelming proclamation: discontentment with the public life coupled with an alternative reality. This alternative reality is God's vision for the earth. The above passage from Isaiah continues in verse 12 to show us an example of God's reality: *"The Lord will guide you continually...your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt...you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets to live in."*

As Christians, we also see this work of **holy discontentment** in the life and story of Jesus Christ. A review of the New Testament reveals that Jesus talked most about the kingdom, or reign, of God. This reign of God is breaking into our reality. The beautiful thing about Christ's story is that we are invited to participate in it. We are called to usher in this reign of God, to participate with God in repairing the breach, in sharing our bread with the hungry, and lifting up our voices on behalf of the oppressed. Sometimes that means us, as God's people, are called to speak truth to power in love, to live into, and call on the powers and principalities at hand, in order to influence change.

The PC(USA) Office of Public Witness in Washington, DC, provides services that help Presbyterians express their concerns and holy discontentment 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.

"Holy Discontentment" is a publication of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness, intended to be a resource for Presbyterians and other people of faith seeking to engage in public witness ministries.

How to be an Effective Advocate

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 should be yours.** Members of Congress rely on the letters, phone calls, emails, visits, print media, and even social media engagement to gauge how the voters in their districts are thinking.

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To make the most impact, it is best to develop a personal relationship with your Member of Congress. Easy ways to do this are to go to office-sponsored events or to call or visit your elected officials' offices. It is important for your Members' staff to know your name, as well as your standing in the community.

To help get you started in building this relationship, the Office of Public Witness maintains an online action center where you can look up who your elected officials are and their contact information (<http://capwiz.com/pcusa/dbq/officials/>). On this site, you can see sample letters on various issues, as well as send direct email to your legislators from our online platform. An important thing to keep in mind is that we, as the church, are involved in *issue advocacy*, not partisan, political lobbying. The following sections will discuss the various strategies available to use for effective advocacy.

Contacting Your Legislator

Personal Meeting:

Hear the good news: you do not need to travel to Washington, DC, to have your voice heard. It is often easier to get an appointment with the district office of the legislator.

Be tenacious in setting up your appointment. You may have to call more than once to get a response. If you are asked to submit a meeting request in writing (fax or email), follow up by phone or email regularly. Once your appointment is scheduled, you must adequately prepare for the meeting.

If you cannot schedule an appointment with your legislator for any reason, phone calls, letters, emails, print media, and social media usage are other viable options.

Tips for an effective personal meeting:

- **Know your legislator**, including his/her committee membership, legislative record, and priority issues.
- **Understand yourself**, including your own influence and the ability to communicate that. (*Are you a clergy person? The chair of your church's Justice Committee? A community leader? The director of a service agency? A member of a civic association? How many people do you influence?*)
- Be prepared to **share directly your concerns** with the legislator as well as to respond to any questions he/she may ask.
- **Send a thank you letter** to the legislator, even if the meeting does not go well.

Using the Telephone:

Telephoning your Senator or Representative is another way to communicate your opinion. You will want to prepare the same way that you would for an in-person visit. Telephone calls are especially effective when time is short, such as before an important vote. The disadvantage is that there is no written record.

To reach the Washington office of any Member of Congress or any congressional committee, phone the **Capitol switchboard at (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, or looking it up on our website.

To express your opinion of an Administration action, phone the **White House comment line at (202) 456-1111** or submit a comment through the website. 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.

On occasion, the Office of Public Witness will join with partners to organize a "call-in day" in which thousands of advocates are invited to inundate the phone lines with a particular message for Congress. Please take advantage of these opportunities to join in a larger strategy.

Letter Writing:

Hand written letters are very effective tools of communication; however, due to security measures, it may take up to four weeks for your legislator to receive the document in his/her Washington office. Therefore, hand written letters are not the best option for pressing issues, unless you plan to hand-deliver it.

Tips for writing a letter to your legislator:

- **Be brief** (a few sentences; a few paragraphs at most).
- **Be polite.**
- Draw on **personal experience**
- **Ask questions.**
- **Follow up** after they respond (with another written letter).

Emails:

For time-sensitive issues, email is one of the best means of communication with your legislator. If you follow the same tips as prescribed in the letter-writing section, you are bound to have an effective email. *An important thing to remember:* when you send an email, make sure to include your postal mail address so the Member knows that you a constituent.

In the OPW's online action center you can find suggested letters and send them to your legislator directly. This is a quick and easy way to use email as an advocacy tool.

Many people question the effectiveness of emails. **It is a useful tool.** Although most emails will not receive a personal response from a legislator or legislative staff, rest assured that your voice is documented as being *for* or *opposed* to something. Thus, it is important to be clear in your electronic communication about your position so that they can accurately document your response.

Other Organizing ideas:

Be creative! Respond to action alerts in ways that best use the strengths of your congregation or community. Organize the Justice Committee from your church to make a visit with your legislators while they are at home during an "in-district work period," otherwise known as recess. Or organize your church's own call-in day, using talking points that the Office of Public Witness has provided in an action alert.

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Print Media

Members of Congress have staff that scan local, regional, and state papers on a regular basis looking for opinion pieces, like Letters to the Editor and Op-Eds. Like email communication, these pieces frequently get sorted into *for* or *opposed* categories, though very specific "asks" or criticisms may receive a more personalized response. Members are particularly interested in opinion pieces in which they are mentioned by name, so do not forget to name your Member and make your "ask" or criticism clear.

Tips for Letters to the Editor

- Submit your letter quickly – **less than three days** after the appearance of the original article to which you are responding.
- **Always refer to the original article** by title and date.
- **Keep it concise** by only making one point.
- Use firsthand experience, but also sound reasoning.

Tips for Op-Eds

- Keep it between **500-750 words**.
- **Get to the point** quickly.
- **Anticipate the counterarguments** and refute them with facts.
- Have **at least one memorable phrase** for them to easily quote.
- Close on a **powerful and thought-provoking** note.
- Use **stories and personal experience**.

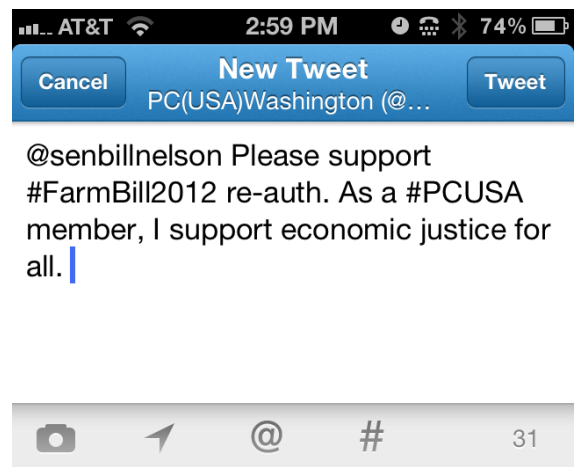
The voices of clergy or unusual gatherings of people of faith are often interesting to media, particularly when clergy speak in concert with ecumenical or interfaith voices (eg. co-signed op-eds). It may also be beneficial for a group of clergy to organize a meeting with the local or state paper's editorial board in order to develop a relationship with them. Building relationships provides an excellent gateway to influencing what opinions the paper chooses to print and to achieve publication for your own opinion pieces.

Social Media



Twitter (www.twitter.com):

Almost every legislator in the House and Senate has a **Twitter handle** (username). While this mode of communication is not as formal as letter writing or voice calling, it is a simple way to communicate brief opinions. If there are enough constituents tweeting a legislator at the same time, the public voice is bound to be heard. To tweet your legislator, you will need to put the "@" symbol followed by their twitter handle with NO SPACES. Twitter only allows 140 characters (including spaces) to be communicated, therefore keep brevity in mind. For example, to tweet Senator Bill Nelson about the Farm Bill:



Hashtags (indicated by #) are additional words that relate to the tweet -- "keywords," if you will. For example, if you want the PC(USA) to see that you are mentioning them, you use the hashtag "#PCUSA." If you want to address the PC(USA) directly, you need to use the "@" symbol followed by their twitter handle ("@pcusa"). The Office of Public Witness' Twitter handle is "@pcusawashington." As a general rule, hashtags are usually the last component of a tweet, but you can also incorporate them into the body of the tweet, especially if that saves you characters.



Facebook (www.facebook.com):

Facebook is another important social media tool. Like Twitter, most legislators have a **Facebook page**, which has a **"wall"** that can be written on. In order to write on an elected official's wall, you need to search for him/her by simply typing in the name in the search box. Usually you are not allowed to write on a wall unless you "like" that Facebook page first, though each person may set different security settings. When posting on a legislator's wall, use an economy of words and quickly get to the point. Be polite and respectful. At the very least, you will get recorded by their legislative aides as either FOR or AGAINST a given issue. It is highly likely that the legislator will not respond to your post, however, you can rest assured that someone is reading it and recording it.

How to "share" on Facebook:

Go to our Facebook page (URL Listed below), find a status that you want to share with others, and click the "share" button beneath the post. You can then publish it to your own profile or send it to a friend.

How to "retweet" on Twitter:

Search "pcusawashington" on twitter, find a tweet that you want to share, and click the "retweet" or "RT" button below the text. Post the tweet.

Note: all social media platforms now have apps for smart phones in addition to being accessible online.



Stay Informed

The PC(USA) Office of Public Witness in Washington, DC, maintains several online platforms to better serve you.

Website: <http://www.pcusa.org/washington>

Blog: <http://officeofpublicwitness.blogspot.com>

Find your elected officials: <http://capwiz.com/pcusa/dbq/officials/>

Social Media:



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