



THE ADVOCATE'S TOOLBOX

THE ADVOCATE'S TOOLBOX

Various factors influence an elected official's vote, including their party's position, personal beliefs, the advice of staff and friends, and lobbyists. But their most important influence should be the voices of the constituents who elected them. Elected officials rely on input from the public, through letters, emails, telephone calls, in-person or virtual visits, social media engagement and media coverage, to better understand constituent concerns. The Office of Public Witness maintains an online action center where you can find your elected officials and their offices' contact information (votervoice.net/PCUSA/home). On this site, you can locate sample letters on various policy priorities, as well as send an email to your legislators from our online platform. Keep in mind that we, as the Church, are involved in policy priorities advocacy representing moral questions, not partisan, political lobbying.



MEETING WITH YOUR ELECTED LEADER

How do I request a meeting?

To request a meeting, you should first obtain the contact information for the office's scheduler. This can be found on the legislator's website or by calling their home district office. Email a written request to the scheduler. Include your name, the issue you plan to discuss, a range of times you are available to meet and your contact information.

What should I bring to the meeting?

- Proof of identification (you may need to show an ID at the door).
- Notes on what you plan to discuss.
- Something to take notes with during the meeting.
- A digital camera or phone to document the meeting.
- Materials to leave behind (fact sheets, business cards, etc.).

How long does a meeting typically last?

Meetings with a legislator can be as short as 10–15 minutes, though meetings with the legislative staffers may last longer. The following is a suggested framework for the roles and agenda of a visit and a template to adapt to your meeting's goals.

Roles and Duties

Facilitator	The Facilitator begins the meeting by introducing the group, explaining the purpose of the meeting, and providing space for each person to briefly introduce themselves. The facilitator helps guide the conversation and will redirect if it goes off-track.
Personal Storyteller	The Personal Story is key to every meeting. A member of your group who has either been directly impacted by the public policy or has worked closely with impacted individuals or communities should be present. While legislators are familiar with the statistics, these stories show how people's lives are impacted and how your community would benefit from a prophetic public policy.
Issues, Point People	Decide what specific issues your group wants to discuss while planning the meeting. Those who are well versed in these issues are the Point People and will help in providing facts and answering questions.
Asker	The Ask is the critical part of the visit when you request your elected official to support or reject specific policy or provisions of a piece of legislation.

Agenda

Introductions

The Facilitator should begin the meeting by thanking the elected leader or staffer for their time, introducing the group as a whole, and then inviting everyone in attendance to introduce themselves. Each participant should state the faith community they represent to exhibit the group's capacity. This is also an appropriate time to share words of appreciation for the elected leader's previous actions, votes, statements or presence at community events.

Personal Story

A member of your group who is directly impacted by the public policy or has worked closely with the marginalized individuals or communities who are impacted should share the significance of the policy being discussed. Personal stories allow elected leaders to better understand the implications of a piece of legislation.

For example, a representative may support the general idea of expanding affordable housing, but hearing from a Presbyterian congregation that has partnered with local organizations to shelter families facing eviction can highlight the urgency and human cost of inaction, helping to shape how the representative prioritizes housing policies and funding.

The "Ask"

Summarize the goals for your meeting into an ask of your elected leader. As they answer, listen well and take notes. Look for indications of their views and find opportunities to provide helpful information and correct misinformation. While they may not agree with you on all issues, try to find a common ground to continue your work in partnership. You'll likely not convince them to change their position in one meeting, but you can be intentional in building a relationship to transform their perspective and stance.

Much of advocacy involves listening and providing opportunities for the elected leader or staffer to share their priorities and concerns and ask questions. They will appreciate the chance to be heard rather than only being talked at. If they ask a question you are unable to answer, that's OK. Be honest and offer to find the answer and report back.

Thank You and Invitation

Thank them and invite them to an upcoming service, prayer vigil or other event you have planned. Offer to be a resource to them and remember to exchange business cards or contact information. Consider asking them to take a photo with your group — most offices love the photo opportunity!

After the Meeting

Debrief your meeting: It's essential to regroup immediately after your meeting, while details are still fresh. Step outside the office building first to ensure privacy, then take time to reflect as a group:

- Did we meet our goals for the meeting? Reflect on your original objectives — were they fully or partially achieved?
- What are the next steps? Identify any action items or follow-up tasks, including who is responsible for each.
- How did we perform as a team? Consider what went well and what could be improved for future meetings.
- What new information did we learn that should be shared with the Office of Public Witness or other partners? Note any insights, data points or opportunities for collaboration.
- What questions remain unanswered? Determine what additional information or clarification is still needed and how to obtain it.

Introductions



Personal Story



The "Ask"



Thank You and Invitation

TELEPHONE

Calling your elected leaders is another effective way to communicate your opinion. Telephone calls are particularly beneficial when time is short, such as before an important vote. The disadvantage is that there is no written record.

You can find your elected leader's phone number on their website or by calling the Capitol switchboard at 202-224-3121 and asking for the office you are looking to contact by name. It is helpful to prepare the same way that you would for an in-person visit. Start by introducing yourself and sharing a personal story on how you or your community will be impacted by the discussed piece of legislation. Ask them the same thing you would if you were meeting in person, and thank them for answering your call or passing the message along if you leave a voicemail.

To express your opinion of an administration's action, you can submit a comment on the White House website or call the comment line at 202-456-1111. Although individual messages are not communicated 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 take part in a larger strategy.

LETTERS

Handwritten letters are a powerful and personal way to communicate with your elected leader. They stand out and can leave a lasting impression. However, because of necessary security screening, it may take up to four weeks for a letter to reach a legislator's Washington, D.C., office. For time-sensitive matters, consider delivering your letter in person or using another method to ensure your message is received promptly. Even with the delay, a handwritten note can be a meaningful and memorable way to share your perspective.

Tips for writing a letter or email to your elected official:

- Be brief (a few sentences or a few paragraphs at most).
- Be polite.
- Draw on personal experience.
- Ask questions.
- Follow up after receiving a response.

EMAIL

For time-sensitive issues, email is one of the best means of communication with your elected officials. When you send an email, ensure you include your postal mail address so they know you are a constituent. Although emails will not receive a personal response from an official or staff, rest assured your voice is documented as being for or opposed to something. Therefore, it is important to be clear in your communication about your position so it can be documented accurately.

The Office of Public Witness has an online action center (votervoice.net/PCUSA/home) where you can find suggested letters and send them to your legislator directly. You can also access voting resources, sign up for action alerts and find legislation on the same site.

SOCIAL MEDIA

All members of Congress, and most other elected officials, have active social media accounts. Here, they post opinions, actions, press statements and other beneficial information. You can gauge an elected or appointed leader's beliefs toward policies based on the posts on their account, who they follow and what issues they choose to post about. Follow your elected or appointed leader's page to stay up to date on their actions at home and in Washington.

You can share your beliefs in a post and tag an elected official, but it is not promised it will be seen by the official or staffer. Instead, using social media platforms as a tool for education and mobilization is a great option. When posting about an elected official, make sure the information is accurate and credible.

Facebook

To stay up to date on the actions of the Office of Public Witness, like our Facebook page (facebook.com/pcusawashington). To share a status with a friend or publish to your page, click the "share" button underneath the post.

Instagram

To stay up to date with the actions of the Office of Public Witness, follow our Instagram account ([@pcusa_opw](https://www.instagram.com/pcusa_opw)). To share a post with your friend or to your story, click the arrow icon underneath the post.

X and other social media platforms

Many members of Congress and other appointed leaders have an X handle. Leaders use the platform to express opinions on policies and communicate in real time with their constituents and the press. Constituents can reply to a post to express their support or disapproval of a leader's actions.

We recognize that the landscape of social media is ever-changing. New platforms are popularized constantly, including sites designed with partisanship in mind (Bluesky, Truth Social, etc.). We encourage finding any elected and faith leaders on any relevant platform.

HOSTING A PRAYER VIGIL

Hosting prayer vigils allows faith leaders to highlight that our nation's policy decisions are moral decisions rooted in shared spiritual and scriptural traditions that call us to care for poor and vulnerable populations, tend to the sick, welcome the stranger and seek peace. No matter how small, events such as a vigil send a powerful message about what is important to people of faith and conscience.

When planning a prayer vigil, it is important to thoughtfully incorporate patterns of prayer and reflection drawn from diverse ecumenical and interfaith traditions. Doing so helps provide a unified moral voice and public witness within communities, strengthening efforts to address systemic injustice and promote lasting change.

Preparation:

- Coordinate a public prayer vigil with faith leaders, local agencies and service providers, community members, and, if possible, local elected leaders.
- Identify the core leaders and speakers, and make sure to invite impacted people to help plan and speak at the event. Agree on messaging and talking points, assigning specific points to each speaker, and ensuring they have time limits.
- Consider inviting elected officials, including representatives, senators, city council members or the mayor.
- Be clear in your goals, what you want to accomplish and how many people you hope will join the event.
- Identify the best location for the vigil, which is generally somewhere central in a symbolic memorial, state capitol, park or city hall. If able, host your vigil at or near your member of Congress' local office. Ensure you apply for any permits needed for the location.
- Reserve or order any equipment necessary, such as microphones, cameras, banners, candles and projectors (make sure you can access electrical outlets).
- Choose a time of day best for attendance and media — most news reports take place at 5–6 p.m. and 10–11 p.m., so a few hours before is best for press events.
- Promote the event through social media, websites, congregational bulletins and flyers.

- Bring signs that are consistent with your messaging and agreed upon ahead of time.
- Invite the media by issuing a media advisory and following up with a press release after the event.
- If you are able to host a wide range of organizations together, you can hold a 24- or 48-hour vigil outside the office of your representative or senator. Create a spreadsheet to sign up each organization with a two-hour block of time.

Setup:

The setup for the vigil should ensure all faiths are respected and welcomed with awareness and consciousness. Drawing on faith traditions and rituals can make vigils much more powerful, raising the creative and dramatic tension.

- Ask clergy to wear collars, stoles, robes and any other appropriate religious attire.
- Include a procession with candles and other religious symbols to a symbolic location.
- Lift up stories in sacred text.
- Have space for participants to write prayers, then deliver them to your representatives and senators.
- Make visuals — photos, drawings, other art mediums, etc.
- Invite participants at the vigil to be part of further action and advocacy by writing and calling their representatives and senators.

Sample Prayer Vigil Program:

Welcome: Write a few words about the purpose and focus of your prayer vigil. Why now? What's the concern? Who's affected? What values shape your faith traditions' response to these concerns?

Opening Prayer: Ask a clergy or community leader to open with a prayer or a discipline from their faith tradition.

Music: Invite local musicians who share similar values to join your vigil — have them lead one or two songs throughout the program. Choose songs that are connected to the cause or songs that everyone can sing together. Be mindful of diverse faith traditions and language when choosing music.

Speaker: Include a personal story from a local community member about how the issue would impact families and communities. More than one story can be integrated throughout the program. You may also integrate creative symbols or rituals from faith traditions that draw more attention to the importance of the issue.

Prayer: One person may lead the prayers, or you might invite several faith leaders to pray according to their traditions. Involve vigil participants in praying a refrain throughout your prayer time or pray in a circle so everyone has the opportunity to participate. Consider offering prayers in multiple languages.

Song and Closing: Reiterate the focus and purpose of your vigil and send participants off with a call to raise their voices to the public sphere on this issue. Consider a procession or march to another significant location.

PUBLIC HEARINGS AND TOWN HALLS

Prepare:

- Find out when your member of Congress' next public event is. If you can't find announcements online, call your member directly to find out. When you call, be friendly and say to the staffer, "Hi, I'm a constituent, and I'd like to know when his or her next public forum will be." If they don't know, ask to be added to the email list so that you get notified when they do.
- Send out a notice of the public hearing to your group, and get commitments from group members to attend. Distribute whatever information you have on your member's voting record, as well as prepared questions, to all group members.
- Prepare values-driven questions. As people of faith, come ready with five to 10 sharp, fact-based questions that reflect moral clarity — link them to the official's record and raise the ethical stakes behind their actions and decisions.
- Get connected to the local press. Research online what local reporters have written about your members of Congress. Before you head to the public event, reach out and explain why you and your group are attending, and provide them with background materials and a quote. Journalists on deadline — even those who might not agree with you — appreciate when you provide easy material for a story.

At the public event:

- Get there early, meet up and get organized. Distribute the handout of questions and encourage members to ask the questions on the sheet or similar ones. Review your ground rules: You're going to be respectful, polite, and nonconfrontational in all of your interactions with the member and their staff.
- Get seated and spread out. Head into the venue a bit early to grab seats at the front half of the room, but do not all sit together. Sit by yourself or in groups of two and spread out throughout the room. This will help reinforce the impression of broad consensus.
- Make your voices heard by asking good questions. When the member opens the floor for questions, everyone in the group should put their hands up and keep them there. Look friendly or neutral so that staffers will call on you. When you're asking a question, remember the following guidelines:
 - Stick with the prepared list of questions. Don't be afraid to read it straight from the printout if you need to.
 - Be polite but persistent and demand real answers.
 - Don't give up the mic until you're satisfied with the answer.
- Keep the pressure on. After one member of the group finishes, everyone should raise their hands again. The next member of the group to be called on should move down the list of questions and ask the next one.
- Support the group and reinforce the message. After one member of your group asks a question, everyone should applaud to show that the feeling is shared throughout the audience. Whenever someone from your group gets the mic, they should note that they're building on the previous questions — amplifying the fact that you're part of a broad group.
- Record everything! Assign someone in the group to use their smartphone or video camera to record advocates asking questions and the member's response. These clips can be shared through social media and picked up by local and national media. Please familiarize yourself with your state and local laws, along with any applicable Senate or House rules, prior to recording. These laws and rules vary substantially from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. If you are uncertain of the laws or rules in the jurisdiction, pause and ask.

After the public event:

- Reach out to the media. If there's media at the public event, the people who asked questions should approach them afterward and offer to speak about their concerns. When the event is over, you should engage local reporters on social media or by email and offer to provide an in-person account of what happened, as well as your pictures or videos. Ensure that the members of your group who are directly affected by specific threats are the ones whose voices are elevated when you contact the media.
- Share everything. Post pictures, videos, your thoughts about the event, etc., on social media. Tag the member's office and encourage others to share widely.

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. The voices of clergy or unusual gatherings of people of faith are often interesting to the media, particularly when clergy speak in concert with ecumenical or interfaith voices (e.g., co-signed op-eds).

Tips for a letter 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 and 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.

CONGREGATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Building Advocacy Teams in Your Church

Congregational advocacy begins with committed relationships and a shared sense of holy discontent. Building an advocacy team means gathering members who are willing to listen deeply, pray boldly and act faithfully. Teams can begin with as few as three people, representing diverse perspectives from the congregation. Their role is to identify pressing concerns about justice, educate the congregation, and connect with local and denominational advocacy efforts. Partnering with existing partners already doing this work — like mission committees, local partners and national agencies — can strengthen these efforts.

Leading as Youth, Members, Elders and Clergy Together

Holy discontent is not bound by age or title. Advocacy flourishes when youth bring prophetic imagination, members bridge community connections, elders offer wisdom and institutional memory, and pastoral staff provide structure and theological grounding. Create shared spaces for leadership where decisions and action steps are co-created. Encourage youth and young adults to speak in worship or lead intergenerational forums. Members can motivate their community networks. Elders can sponsor events or bring motions before session meetings. Pastoral staff can coordinate resources and ensure alignment with the church's mission.

Church Bulletins, Worship Integrations and Public Messaging

Worship is central to who we are as Presbyterians — and it's a powerful space for advocacy formation. Use bulletins and liturgies to highlight justice concerns with prayers of the people, confessionals or minute-for-mission updates. Incorporate hymns and Scripture that reflect themes of liberation, peace and repentance. Make advocacy visible and spiritually rooted: Include QR codes to sign petitions, promote local vigils or community events, and share stories of impact. Public messaging — on your website, social media or church signs — should reflect a theology of justice that welcomes the community and invites others into the movement.

PASTORAL NOTES FOR FAITH LEADERS

Navigating Your Role in the Community

Faith leaders are often seen as moral compasses, bridge-builders and public theologians. In seasons of holy discontent, your voice matters — and so does your presence. Be intentional about how and when you show up in the public square, recognizing the power and responsibility that comes with clerical leadership. Building trust with community partners, local officials and interfaith allies expands your congregation's witness. Listen before speaking and lead with both humility and conviction.

Building Congregational Resilience

Congregational justice work can stir discomfort, conflict or fatigue — especially when challenging long-standing systems. Resilience begins with spiritual grounding. Anchor your community in prayer, Scripture, spiritual practices and Sabbath rest. Create spaces for lament as well as joy. Equip congregational leaders to help carry the load and rotate leadership roles to avoid burnout. Remind the congregation that faithful justice work is a long journey, not a short campaign.

Discerning Your Congregation's Public Voice

Not every justice issue will resonate equally in every church, but every congregation has a public voice shaped by its theology, history, local context and global connections. Discernment involves listening — through prayer, study, and dialogue with your session and members. Ask: What is breaking God's heart in our community right now? Use that question to shape statements, sermons and public actions. When your church speaks or acts publicly, ensure the message is grounded in Scripture, General Assembly policy and pastorally sensitive — bold, but not polarizing; clear, but never cruel. Be sure to be mindful of vulnerable individuals when participating in advocacy events — especially those with mixed immigration status.

A NOTE ON NONVIOLENT ESCALATION AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Strategic Escalation in Advocacy Campaigns

Injustice often resists polite appeals. There are times in advocacy when moral urgency demands that we escalate our tactics — moving from petitions to protests, from quiet meetings to visible public witness. Escalation is not about anger for its own sake; it is a faithful, strategic tool to amplify marginalized voices, disrupt complacency and compel decision-makers to act. Look to Scripture for precedent: prophets tore garments, Jesus overturned tables. Nonviolent escalation — when done prayerfully and with purpose — can awaken hearts and systems alike.

Discernment and Safety in Public Witness

Civil disobedience is not entered into lightly. It requires spiritual discernment, legal awareness and pastoral care. Faith leaders and congregations must prayerfully consider: Is this action aligned with our mission? Are we prepared to accept the consequences? Who is most impacted by this decision? Work with experienced partners and know the legal boundaries. Prioritize the safety — emotional, physical and spiritual — of your participants, especially those who are vulnerable or already targets of unjust systems. Some may protest in the streets; others may pray in the pews. All are part of the witness.



RESOURCE GUIDE AND UPDATES

Recommended Trainings, Networks and VoterVoice

- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Social Witness Policy Statements by Topic: pcusa.org/about-pcusa/agencies-entities/interim-unified-agency/ministry-areas/social-witness-policy/social-witness-policy-topic
- PC(USA) Action Alerts: votervoice.net/mobile/PCUSA/home
- PC(USA) Election Center: votervoice.net/PCUSA/ElectionCenter
- Washington Interfaith Staff Community: washingtoninterfaith.org
- How to Stay Updated with the Most Recent Guide: <https://pcusa.org/resource/how-stay-updated-with-most-recent-guide>
- Advocates Templates <https://pcusa.org/resource/advocates-templates>

INTERACTIVE TOOLS

- Advocacy Planning Worksheet
- Blank Meeting Agenda Template
- Social Media Campaign Planner
- Congregational Action Plan



Presbyterian Office of Public Witness
pcusa.org/opw

The Rev. Jimmie R. Hawkins
Director
jimmie.hawkins@pcusa.org

The Rev. Christina Cosby
Representative for Domestic Issues
and Environmental Justice
christina.cosby@pcusa.org

Dr. Andrew Peterson
Representative for Peacemaking
and Gun Violence Prevention
andrew.peterson@pcusa.org

Catherine Gordon
Representative for International Issues
catherine.gordon@pcusa.org

Ivy Lopedito
Mission Associate
ivy.lopedito@pcusa.org