

# Grassroots Advocacy Toolkit

~ By the North Carolina Council of Churches ~

Created by Megan Loughlin Nerz, Volunteer for Legislative Advocacy.  
Updated in 2017 by Steve Ford, Volunteer Program Associate.

*Note: Because the NC Council of Churches is made up of Christian denominations, this toolkit has been prepared specifically with Christians in mind. However, most of its content would be equally useful for people of other faiths.*

## Understanding Advocacy

### What is it?

- It's a way to bring about change and transformation in people, policies, structures and systems.
- It's about influencing those in positions of power to act with justice.
- It's prayer, education, networking, organization, mobilization, and lobbying.
- It is speaking for, speaking with, and helping people speak for themselves.
- It's what God calls us to do: to speak out against injustice, to defend the vulnerable, to empower the disenfranchised to speak out for themselves, and to challenge and hold the powerful accountable.
- It's a practical tool that brings the needs and interests of the poor to the attention of the public and the government.

### Why is it important for us as people of faith?

- Because our response to human need is formed and motivated by Christ's compassion, commitment and concern for the poor and the oppressed.
- Because God asks us to build the kingdom—here and now, by standing in solidarity with those who are suffering.
- Because advocacy is based on the very same values that shape our Christian commitment to bring "good news."

*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.*

*Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

*~ Proverbs 31:8-9 (NIV)*

## What's a Christian to do?

To be faithful to the will of God, Christians are called to use the legislative process to bring about change and to build the Kingdom.

Each of us is a source of power because we elect policy makers at the local, statewide, and national levels.

## 1. Register and Vote

- Your vote is important and you can't vote unless you're registered.
- [Click here](#)<sup>1</sup> to learn more about how to register in North Carolina.
- [Click here](#)<sup>2</sup> to learn more about absentee voting, early voting and ID requirements.
- [Click here](#)<sup>3</sup> to help locate your voting place and one-stop voting sites.

## 2. Do Your Homework

### Research your issue.

- When you know your issue you are much better able to make strong and persuasive arguments in support of your position.
- Build credibility and confidence by knowing both sides of the issue.
- You don't have to be an expert, but you do need basic information and you do have to care!

### Know who represents you.

- Figure out who the decision-makers and power-brokers are.
- Learn about your legislator's position/record on the issue.
- Identify which groups and organizations are working for or against an issue.
- To find out who your state legislators are, [click here](#).<sup>4</sup>
- Once you know who your senator and representative are, you can find phone numbers, email addresses and other information about them here: [Senate](#)<sup>5</sup> | [House](#)<sup>6</sup>

### Learn about the legislative process

- What level of government is dealing with the issue?
- Has legislation been introduced and is it in the House or the Senate?
- Has it been referred to a committee?
- What happens if the governor vetoes a bill?
- To learn more, check out these additional resources:
  - [How a law is made](#)<sup>7</sup>
  - [How the N.C. General Assembly is structured](#)<sup>8</sup>

## How to find a bill

- If you have a bill number, you can find the text of the bill, its sponsors and legislative history, its current status, fiscal notes, and other information by entering the number in “Find a Bill” at the top of the General Assembly’s home page: [www.ncleg.net](http://www.ncleg.net).
- If you don’t have a bill number, [click here and follow any of the options to search for the bill](#).<sup>9</sup>

## 3. Do Something

Once you do your homework, do something! Here are some of your options:

### Attend a committee meeting.

- Once a bill is introduced in either the House or Senate, it is assigned to a committee for discussion, debate, study, and recommendation.
- The speaker of the House and chair of the Senate Rules Committee customarily name the committee to which the bill is assigned.
- Dozens of committees operate in the House and Senate. Once you know the bill’s number, you can use “Find a Bill” at [www.ncleg.net](http://www.ncleg.net) to find out which committee it has been assigned to. [Then you can click here to find out more about the committee](#)<sup>10</sup> – who sits on it, when it meets, and whether your legislator is on it.
- Committees typically hold meetings that are open to the public. These meetings are generally conducted to obtain and analyze information and opinions about proposed legislation. Often these committee meetings give members of the public a chance to comment on the legislation being considered. Occasionally a committee will schedule a special public hearing on a bill.
- We urge people of faith to attend committee meetings and public hearings as a way of increasing their understanding of pending bills and the legislative process. Speaking out at meetings and hearings is another way of making your voice heard and demonstrating the strength of your opinion on a bill.
- If a committee approves a bill, it can be placed on the [House or Senate calendar \(the daily schedule of business\)](#)<sup>11</sup> for consideration by the full membership.
- When the House and Senate are in session, visitors are welcome in the galleries on the third floor of the Legislative Building. Audio of each chamber’s floor sessions can be monitored here: [House](#)<sup>12</sup> | [Senate](#)<sup>13</sup>

You elected them! So call them, write them or visit them and tell them how they’re doing!

## Call your legislator.

Sometimes calling your legislator is the fastest and easiest way to communicate your position on an issue. Sometimes when legislation is moving very fast through the House or Senate, calling is the only way to go!

When you call:

- Prepare your remarks beforehand.
- Make sure to say that you are a constituent.
- Identify yourself by position, title, and/or profession.
- If the legislator is not available, ask to speak to the legislative assistant or clerk.
- Say what you are calling about and be specific about the bill and/or issue about which you are calling.
- State your position and the reason behind it in a clear and concise way.
- Specifically tell the person what you would like the legislator to do.
- Ask for feedback from the legislator.
- Be polite and respectful.
- Don't issue ultimatums!
- Keep the call short.
- Leave your contact information.
- Thank the person with whom you have been speaking.

## Write your legislator.

Email is an effective way to communicate with your legislator especially when it's specific and not part of a blanket mailing to all members.

- When you email, include your name, postal address, and phone number.
- The best email is short and well thought out.
- Put the essence of your message (e.g. "Please support H 315") in the subject line. This is especially important during the busiest times of the session.

Whether you email or send a handwritten letter, remember these things:

- Identify yourself
- Tell them what you want.
- Be specific about the action you want them to take.
- Don't go over a page.
- Use your own words.
- Make sure it is well written and easy to read.
- Identify the issue right away and deal with one issue only per letter.
- Be informative.
- Get to the point. Tell them what it is you support or oppose and explain what it means to you and your community.
- If you are hand writing a letter, use business or personal stationery or a plain sheet of white paper (and write neatly!)
- Ask for a reply.

- Be polite and reasonable.
- If your position on an issue is faith-based, say so, but always in a way that is respectful of people's differing beliefs.
- Address the person correctly (The Honorable FirstName LastName)
- Thank him/her at the end of the letter.

## **Visit your legislator.**

- Schedule the meeting in advance. During sessions, legislators are available in their Raleigh offices from Monday evenings through Thursday mornings. At other times, they are often willing to meet with you back in the district.
- When you schedule be prepared to say what the meeting will be about.
- Practice what you want to say before you go.
- If there is a group going, make sure everyone is prepared and agree ahead of time on the role each person will play.
- Be on time.
- Be prepared.
- Introduce yourself!
- Take materials with you. (Bring a notepad and a pen.)
- Be brief (you will probably only get 15-20 minutes so make sure you know what you want to say).
- Identify a specific bill or issue.
- Personalize the issue. Tell a story.
- Make sure to listen and give your legislator an opportunity to ask questions and state his/her position.
- Know the facts.
- Don't argue! (But do know the counterarguments and be prepared to articulate them respectfully).
- Offer to be a resource contact for your legislator.
- Make a recommendation to your legislator ("here is what we would like you to do...") and ask your legislator for a specific action.
- Thank them for their time.
- Follow up with a thank you note and any other material you promised.

## **Write an Op-Ed/Letter to the Editor.**

Op-Ed articles and letters to the editor appear in a newspaper's Editorial Section. Letters are usually about 200 words or less; Op-Eds no more than 750 words.

Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor can be very useful tools for advocates to get the message out.

- Most policymakers read these routinely; it is an important way for elected officials to track issues important to their constituents.
- It is a cheap (free) way to address public opinion.
- They are your words, your message. It is an excellent way to explain a complex issue.
- You can make connections to your faith or connections in policy that are more difficult in hallway conversations. (For example, the connection between reductions in spending on health care for children and resulting productivity losses by employers of parents.)

- If your issue is not getting press, or is now “old news”, an article can revive the issue.

Here are some ideas for how to write an Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor:

- Plan your message. Choose just one. Don't try to pack too much in. If you have a different take or a unique perspective on an issue, it is more likely to be published.
- Choose your target. If you are trying to move public opinion, look for the paper with the largest circulation. If you want to reach a particular legislator, choose his/her hometown paper or one you know that s/he reads.
- Read the paper(s). Find out what kind of issues and writing styles are likely to be published.
- Contact the paper and find out their policies. You want to know about:
  - How to submit – email, FAX, regular mail
  - Timing – when you can submit and how long it will likely take to be published
  - Length limitations
  - Any other rules
- Start writing.
- Keep it as short as possible. When they say 750 words, they mean it. The most common reason that articles are not published is because they are too long.
- Be clear. Big words and lots of statistics do not score more points, they just lose the reader.
- Be direct. Don't use sarcasm or hypothetical questions. Don't make them guess what your point is.
- Real life stories engage readers and can often make a point in far fewer words than a page of statistics.
- Choose words carefully. Do not offend. No personal attacks. Do nothing that detracts the reader from your point.
- Use humor, as long as it is appropriate.
- Explain your stake in the issue up front. If you are a person with disabilities arguing against cuts in services, say so.
- Offer readers action steps, if possible.
- Include your name, address, a phone number where you can be reached, any organizational affiliation, and a one-sentence description of that organization. You definitely do not have to be writing on behalf of an organization to get published.
- Triple check your facts.
- Ask a friend to read it over to check for errors and to be sure it is understandable and engaging.
- Next, send it to the paper(s) the way they asked to get it.
- Call back in a few days if you haven't heard anything. Be persistent.
- Do not get discouraged if they don't print your article. Find out as much as you can about why. Consider sending it to another paper.
- If you do get published, save the clipping. Send it to policymakers in case they didn't see it.

## **Social Networking: How to use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube**

Social networking has rapidly come to play an important role in civic discourse and has emerged as a powerful political tool. Advocates can use these networking channels to:

- Reach a larger audience of existing supporters and potential supporters; inspire public dialogue around our key issues and influence key decision makers.
- Build social relations and interact with people who have similar interests

- Exchange ideas, debate issues and motivate others to take action by sharing media links, videos and other information.
- Get into conversations on key Council issues

Here are some social networking ideas to get you started!

### **Facebook:**

- Create your own Facebook page and "like" the Council's Facebook page.<sup>14</sup>
- Search out and explore other Facebook pages that focus on issues that are of critical concern to you.
- Engage fans of these Pages, exchange ideas, share personal experiences. Post a news story or share a link to a video clip. Encourage "friends" to call or write emails to legislators asking them to support your issue.
- When you network with others you spread the word about your issue within Facebook.

### **Twitter:**

- Using Twitter is an easy way to engage with individuals and other organizations interested in the issues you are interested in. You can share information, offer feedback to breaking news, team up to spread the word about worthy initiatives and advance advocacy priorities. Tweets can help educate people across America; they also have the potential to influence key decision makers.
- The best way to learn about Twitter is to join. You will need to create a username and password for your account. Search for some interesting people to follow, personal friends, national and local advocacy organizations, local politicians, thought leaders and even celebrities, to get a sense of the range of people, organizations and tweets out there. Visit [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com).
- Connect with the NC Council of Churches: [@ncchurches](https://twitter.com/ncchurches)

### **YouTube:**

- Create a YouTube channel and upload videos to help you connect with and inspire those who support the same issues as you!

## Links

- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.ncsbe.gov/Voter-Registration/Registering-to-Vote>
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.ncsbe.gov/Voting>
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.ncsbe.gov/Voter-Tools>
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.ncleg.net/representation/WhoRepresentsMe.aspx>
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.ncleg.net/Senate/Senate.html>
- <sup>6</sup> <http://www.ncleg.net/House/House.html>
- <sup>7</sup> <http://www.ncleg.net/NCGAInfo/Bill-Law/bill-law.html>
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.ncleg.net/NCGAInfo/educational/structure.html>
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.ncleg.net/Legislation/legislation.html>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.ncleg.net/gascripts/Committees/Committees.asp>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.ncleg.net/Calendars/Calendars.html>
- <sup>12</sup> <http://mobile.ncleg.net/New/Audio/StreamAudio.aspx?stream=house>
- <sup>13</sup> <http://mobile.ncleg.net/New/Audio/StreamAudio.aspx?stream=senate>
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/North-Carolina-Council-of-Churches-102219753159474/>