



Building Relationships with Elected Representatives

*United Methodist
Church – North
Carolina
Conference*

*Board of Church
and Society*

This series provides congregations and individuals the skills to build and deploy justice ministries and advocacy methods. Other methods in this series include:

**Building relationships
with elected
representatives*

**Writing a letter or email
to your elected
representative*

**Writing a letter to the
press, blog or website*

**Organizing a rally or
protest meeting*

**Building a
congregational justice
ministry*

**Proposing legislation*

**Parish based
Community Organizing*

**Creating a Conference
Resolution*

**Asset Based
Community
Development*

**Challenging legislators*

**Community Listening*

The Board of Church and Society provides advocacy and justice programs for congregations.

<https://nccumc.org/christianformation/church-and-society/>

Why build a Relationship?

To get true opportunity to influence any legislative body, you have to get to actually know elected officials, and not knowing them personally severely restricts your influence. Building a trust relationship with your elected representative takes time, and even more time if their general political persuasion is different from yours. Elected representatives are obliged to listen to you, this is part of the democratic process. Now they may totally disregard your point of view, but they still have to listen to you.

Understand your own position on the Issues

Your own first step is to know yourself, your values and beliefs and your capabilities. You also need to be clear about the Biblical narrative about justice. Read “The Little Book of Biblical Justice” by Chris Marshall, this will help to put that Biblical narrative into clearer perspective. Then finally, know what the church says about justice and what its stands are on all of life’s issues. You can find the UMC’s positions in the Social Principles.

The easiest way to test your understanding of your own values and beliefs on justice issues is to become informed about what’s going on. Read the news daily, and record what drives you crazy, or makes you angry and then learn the most appropriate way of advocating for those issues that will get the legislators attention.

Find out who your Representatives are

This is generally easy, at the State and County levels you are assigned to a constituency or county precinct by your geographic residence, and this defines the geographic representation of your representatives.

Your representative names and contact details at the NC General assembly can be found on <http://www.ncleg.net/gascripts/members/memberList.pl?sChamber=House> for house members and <http://www.ncleg.net/gascripts/members/reports/countyRepresentation.pl?Chamber=Senate> for Senate members. Go to the following web sites to establish the voting records and positions on issues of the selected representatives. www.votesmart.org and <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/NC> See also <http://www.ncleg.net/representation/WhoRepresentsMe.aspx>

Major Steps in Building a Relationship

- Get data on their background, vocation, voting record, special interests, Legislative Committees, and so on. Use the web sites above to get this information.
- Define your positions relative to your Representatives and define a relationship purpose and journey
- Make contact.... Write letters, ask to meet, go to public meetings and show some interest in the representative’s activities. This will be easier if the representatives reflect your own justice values, and more difficult if they don’t.
- Keep your legislators informed about the public policy situations in your constituency. It’s good to keep sharing important pieces of data they will find useful in their legislative programming.
- Use a good human interest story to reinforce a public policy position you want the legislators to support. These are often used by legislators to illustrate a point in their legislative chambers.
- Advocate for and against positions and voting record of the representative on those issues you should focus on, namely those you have some passion about.
- Build up a broad range of knowledge about the issue and the various directions public policy could take based off your own values and beliefs. This way you can build up an advocacy journey, perhaps even proposing a piece of legislation you feel will strengthen the existing law.
- Attend house meetings and other public events to maintain visibility with the representative. They will get to know you and this will ensure an improved response rate from them.

- Focus on a limited number of issues on a regular basis.
- Don't try to "solve world hunger" with them.
- Keep them informed of your position and offer suggestions to improve what they propose.
- Keep track of their voting, and the legislation they draft.
- Don't threaten or berate them, they will simply begin to ignore you.
- Thank them for votes on positions you support.

Meet with your Representative face to face

Try to plan a meeting during the off-legislative times, when they have more time. Any meeting should be focused on an issue that you wish to provide your position on or to provide encouragement, support and affirmation. They are busy people so try to adhere to the following to make your meeting effective.

Do's

- Prepare well and stick to the facts plus provide sound reasons to support your position
- Provide a one page summary of your position.
- Be receptive to the legislators mood because they may already have a view on the topic and you need to sense when they have stopped listening
- Always write thanking the legislators for their time and reinforce your issue position in one sentence.
- Always use your own language or turn of phrase, so avoid using form letters or copying from well-known advocacy descriptions. This will reinforce in their minds that you are authentic.

Don'ts

- Ramble or pontificate, it wastes time.
- Never be trivial or condescending, this only wastes their time.
- Be argumentative, vindictive or threatening, they will simply start ignoring you.
- Never stretch the truth to win an argument – everything can be fact-checked these days.
- Don't overdo the frequency of contact - they will sense being targeted.

So remember that building a relationship takes time and patience, but the long term rewards are good if you earn their respect.

This document was created by Brian Heymans while he served on the Board of Church and Society.

