



Presbyterian Mission
**Office of
Public Witness**

HOLY DISCONTENTMENT

*Grassroots Advocacy
and Organizing in the PC(USA)*





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INTRODUCTION

*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 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 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. This document serves as a blueprint for Presbyterians who wish to engage more deeply with civic life and move their community deeper into advocacy and organizing for just public policy.

"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.

POWER

Many times, the idea of “power” can breed uneasiness because it invokes experiences and ideas of domination over a more vulnerable entity. An essential element of grassroots organizing and advocacy is building a positive relationship with power — people power to influence the decisions that affect us and our communities. PICO, a national network of faith-based community organizations, defines power as a neutral term that refers to “the ability to act” and affirms that power is necessary to achieve our goals of a more just society. Communities where people are isolated from one another are powerless; they lack the ability to act and to defend themselves. As a result, it is important to assess and understand our power as individuals and as a collective group and to get comfortable using that power to bring our world closer to the Kingdom of God.

Power With Versus Power Over

“Power over” refers to a traditional notion of power, in which dominance and coercion are used to achieve the desired outcome of the person in power. It is “extractive” in that when one entity exerts power over another, the former gains power while the latter loses it. On the other hand, “power with” refers to a relational and collective notion of power. It recognizes that when people and entities come together, are unified — or are organized — they also create power together. This type of power is generative and creative, meaning it is not gained at the expense of another — rather, this can be a win-win situation for different parties. The latter power is not unlike the Christian notions of unity — *“When two or more are gathered here”* — we have power together.

Power is a product of relationship. Communities in which people have relationships with one another have an increased ability to act and control what happens in our collective and individual lives.

CONTEXT FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Values: Administration/Control
Power: Position

Values: Profit
Power: Organized Money

Public Sector

- Elected Officials (national, state, local)
- Government agencies

Contracts/Grants/
Regulations

Campaign
Donations

Private Sector

- Financial Services
- Energy Companies
- Real Estate/Constr.
- Healthcare/Insurance
- Manufacturing

Voters/
Taxpayers

Civic Sector

- Families
- Religious Congregations
- Labor Unions
- Civic Associations
- Advocacy Groups

Workers/
Consumers

Values: All other motives
Power: Organized People
and Organized Money

As you do this work, ask yourselves these questions:

- *What power do you have?*
- *What power does my group have collectively?*
- *How are my activities building power for my group's members and for this congregation/Presbytery?*
- *How are we channeling the power that we have to work with God for a more just society?*



THE ADVOCATE'S TOOL BOX

Our lawmakers' votes are influenced by their personal views, their party's positions, the advice of staff and friends, and lobbyists. But their single most important influence should be that of the constituents who elected them. 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.

To make the most impact, it is best to develop a personal relationship with your member of Congress and build the local power of your congregation or presbytery to demonstrate that your justice agenda is broadly held throughout your faith community. 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 and your Grassroots Advocacy Team, as well as your standing in the community. The following sections will discuss the various strategies available to use for effective advocacy.

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 (capwiz.com/pcusa/dbq/officials).

On this site, you can see sample letters on various issues, as well as send 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. An important thing to keep in mind is that we, as the church, are involved in *issue advocacy*, not partisan, political lobbying.

Meeting With Your Member of Congress

To request a meeting, you should first get the contact information for the office's scheduler. Call the legislator's home district office (not the D.C. office) and ask for the scheduler's name and email address. Email a written request to the scheduler. The meeting request should include the issue you plan to discuss, a range of times you can 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 say
- 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 do these kinds of meetings typically last?

Meetings with a legislator can be as short as 10–15 minutes, though meetings with legislative staffers may last longer.

Below is a suggested framework for the roles and agenda for a visit, but please adapt it to fit your team and Member of Congress.



Roles and Duties

Facilitator	The <i>Facilitator</i> will kick off the meeting by introducing the group, explaining the purpose for the meeting, and providing space for each person to briefly introduce themselves. The facilitator will also jump in if the meeting goes off-track and redirect the conversation
Personal Storyteller	The <i>Personal Story</i> is key to every meeting. Someone should be present who has either been directly impacted by the unjust public policy, or has worked closely with marginalized individuals or communities. Telling these stories will show how people’s lives are impacted and how your community would benefit from a prophetic public policy.
Issues, Point People	There will be specific issues your group will want to discuss, which you should decide while planning the meeting. People who are well versed in these issues are the <i>Point People</i> .
Asker	<i>The Ask</i> is the critical part of the visit when you ask for the member of Congress to support or reject specific policy or provisions as part of a bill.

Agenda

• **Introductions**

The Facilitator should start the meeting by thanking the Member for their time, introducing the group as a whole, and then having each person introduce themselves. Each participant should state the faith community they represent to show the power of the group.

• **Personal Story**

Someone should share a story about why members of Congress should reduce funding for detention and deportation and robustly fund refugee resettlement and assistance abroad.

• **“The Ask”**

Make an ask of your congressperson. An example of an ask could be, *“Our community welcomes refugees and immigrants, and I urge you to reflect the best of our American values of compassion, hospitality, and welcome. Can we count on you to protect refugee assistance and resettlement from the cuts proposed in the president’s request and work to reduce funding for detention, deportation and border militarization?”*

When they answer, listen well and take notes. While they may not agree with you on all these issues, try to find common ground to continue to work together on. You’ll likely not convince them to change their mind in one



meeting, but you can intentionally build a relationship that can transform their perspective and stance. Much of advocacy involves listening and providing opportunities for the member to share their priorities and concerns and ask questions. Look for indications of the members' views and find opportunities to provide helpful information or correct misinformation. Members and staff will appreciate the chance to be heard instead of only being talked at. Ask questions and engage in conversation. Answer

questions honestly. If you don't know the answer, say that you don't know but you will find out. Assign one person in the group to follow up.

- **Thank you and invitation**

Thank them, and invite them to an upcoming prayer vigil, service or event you are planning. Offer to be a resource to them, and remember to get the staffers' business cards. Consider asking them to take a photo with your group — most politicians love the photo opportunity!



What if my member of Congress asks me a question I can't answer?

You might not know how to answer every question, and that's okay. Be honest. And, offer to find the answer and report back. Write down the question so you don't forget about it.

After the Meeting

- 1. Debrief your meeting.** It's important to make sure you and your group are on the same page immediately after leaving the meeting, while the conversation is fresh in your mind. Make sure to leave the office building, so your debrief conversation can't be overheard. As a group, review: What did we hear? Did we get what we wanted? What are the next steps? It's also important to evaluate your group's work. How did we do as a team? Share the information learned during your meeting with the Office of Public Witness and other allies.
- 2. Follow up with your member of Congress.** Choose one person to send a follow up email attaching the documents mentioned, providing answers to questions that came up during the meeting, and continuing to engage the member and staff in your group's work. Send the staff you met an email thanking them for their time, attaching any documents you mentioned, providing answers to questions that came up during the meeting, once again making your case against negative proposals and for positive upcoming legislation and inviting them to an upcoming event.
- 3. Send a thank you note.** Immediately send a thank-you note to the office, either

through email or postal mail. In the ensuing weeks and months, follow your representative's actions on the issue you discussed. If he/she votes favorably in the future, continue to send thank-you notes. It's important to express our support when our members of Congress get things right.

Other ways to contact members of Congress:

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 by 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.

Letters — Handwritten 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, handwritten letters are not the best option for pressing issues, unless you plan to hand-deliver them.

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).

E-mail — 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 are 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. They are 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.

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 media, particularly when clergy speak in concert with ecumenical or interfaith voices (e.g., 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.

Tips for Letters to 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

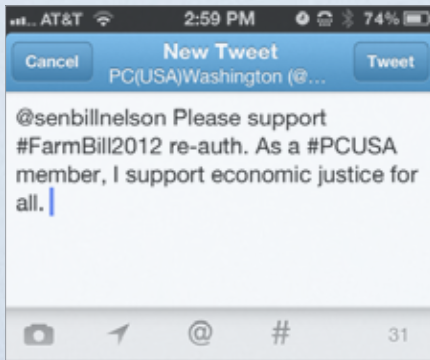
- Keep it between **500–750 words**.
- **Get to the point** quickly.
- **Anticipate the counterarguments**, and refute them with facts.
- Have **at least one memorable phrase** for them to easily quote.
- Close on a **powerful and thought-provoking** note.
- Use **stories and personal experience**



Social Media



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 280 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.

Sharing 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.



Facebook.com — 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 or her by typing the name in the search box. You are not usually 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, but you can rest assured that someone is reading it and recording it.

Sharing on Facebook:

Go to our Facebook page (**facebook.com/pcusawashington**), 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.

Hosting an Interfaith Vigil

Hosting interfaith vigils provides the opportunity for faith leaders to express how our country’s policy decisions are moral decisions, shared across faith traditions, reflecting on the deep Scriptural and spiritual roots of our work to support poor and vulnerable populations, care for the sick, welcome the stranger and promote peace. Even small events, multiplied across the country, will send a powerful message to the administration and Congress about what is important to people of faith and conscience.

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.
- Consider inviting elected officials including representatives, senators, city council members or the mayor.

- Be clear about 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. We are encouraging all to have the vigil at or near the member of Congress’ local office.
- Apply for any permits needed for the location; reserve or order any equipment you’ll need such as microphones, cameras, banners, candles and projectors; and 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 those time blocks is best for press events.
- Promote the event through social media, public service announcements, fliers, websites and congregation bulletins.
- Agree on messaging and talking points.
- Bring signs that are consistent with your messaging and agreed upon ahead of time.
- Assign specific talking points to each speaker and ensure they have time limits.
- Invite the media by issuing a media advisory and following up with a press release after the event.

- Invite participants at the vigil to be part of further action and advocacy by writing and calling their representatives and senators.
- If you are able to get a wide range of organizations together, you could hold a 24- or 48-hour vigil outside the office of your senator or representative. Create a spreadsheet to sign up each organization with two-hour blocks of time.

Setup

The setup for the vigil should ensure that 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.
- Have a procession with candles to a symbolic location.
- Include a prayer wall with handwritten prayers.
- Lift up stories in sacred texts.
- Highlight passages in Scripture and present to members of Congress.
- Collect and deliver prayers to your senators and representatives.
- Make visuals — photos, drawings, art, etc.
- If you want to do a 24- or 48-hour vigil, make a signup sheet and assign two-hour time slots to each organization involved.

Sample Vigil Program

Welcome — Write a few words about the focus and purpose of your vigil. Why now? What's the concern? Who's affected? What values shape your faith traditions' response to these concerns? This may take the form of brief comments from one of your speakers or a welcome and an opening prayer.

Music — Invite local musicians who share similar values to join your vigil — you can have them do one or two songs throughout the program. Choose songs that are connected to the cause or songs that everyone knows and can sing together.

Opening Prayer — Ask clergy or a lay leader to open with a prayer

Speaker — Include a personal story from a local community member of how the issue would impact families and communities. More than one story can be integrated throughout the program as well. 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 pray. Consider offering prayers in multiple languages.

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

Participating in a Successful Town Hall

Prepare

- *Find out when your member of Congress' next public town hall event is.* Sometimes these are announced well in advance. But sometimes, although they are technically “public,” only select constituents are notified about them shortly before the event. 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 town hall 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 town hall 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 several questions ahead of time for your group to ask.* Your questions should be sharp and fact-based, ideally including information on the member's record, votes they've taken or statements they've made. Thematically, questions should focus on a limited number of issues to maximize impact. Prepare five to 10 questions and hand them out to your group ahead of the meeting.

- *Example question: “As a person of faith, I don't think we should be taking healthcare away from more than 30 million Americans, and this repeal will create serious financial hardship for people who can't afford it. You haven't gone on the record opposing this. Will you commit here and now to vote no on repealing the Affordable Care Act?”*

Get connected to local press.

Research on Google News what local reporters have written about your members of Congress. Find and follow those reporters on Twitter, and build relationships. Before you head to the town hall, 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. Prepare to take videos — this will make your experience that much more newsworthy.

At the Town Hall

Get there early, meet up, and get organized. Meet outside or in the parking lot for a quick huddle before the event. 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 other 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.

After the Town Hall

Reach out to media. If there's media at the town hall, 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 Twitter 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 media.

Share everything. Post pictures, video, your thoughts about the event, etc., to social media. Tag the member's office and encourage others to share widely.

A Note on Escalation and Civil Disobedience

Once you have met with decision makers, and there has been no progress on the issue, you can expand your list of tactics to increase public pressure on your decision maker. This should be done with strategic escalation. It would not be wise to start with a sit-in or civil disobedience, but rather a vigil or rally. As the campaign marches forward it should escalate in a planned and strategic manner, starting with softer tactics like vigils or opinion editorials and moving all the way to fasting or civil disobedience when the moment is right to create greater dramatic tension. See the “Additional Resources” section below for information on Nonviolent Civil Disobedience tactics.

Additional Resources

There are four larger Congregation-based Community Organizing networks and two smaller ones that support local interfaith or ecumenical coalitions across the country. The networks provide training opportunities for congregations and organizers, and facilitate work among the local coalitions. There are many valuable resources on their web pages.

- **Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART)** — 21 organizations in eight states, primarily in the Midwest and Florida, based in Miami.
- **Gamaliel Foundation** — 44 affiliates and seven state offices in 17 states, based in Chicago.
- **Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)** — 57 affiliates in 23 states, based in Chicago.
- **People Improving Communities Through Organizing (PICO)** — 44 federations and eight statewide networks in 17 states, based in Oakland, California. Also works in rural areas.
- **Intervalley Project** — Six affiliates in New England, based in Newton, MA.
- **Interfaith Power and Light (IPL)** — based in San Francisco.

Workshops and Curriculum:

- **Public Narrative and Story of Self workshop slides** — PDF, 20 pages
- **Building Bridges, Building Power: Developments in Institution-Based Community Organizing** — PDF, 34 pages
- **There is Power in Union: A Unitarian Universalist Guide to Worker Justice** — PDF, 18 pages
- **Sustainable Action): Planting the Seeds of Relational Organizing** — PDF, 7 pages
- **198 Methods of Non-Violent Action** — by Gene Sharpe

Training Opportunities:

- **Midwest Academy**
- **Wellstone Action**
- **Momentum** (Youth-focused)
- **NEXT Church Community Organizing Training**

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