

BIBLICAL ADVOCACY 101

Seek justice. Help
the oppressed.
Defend the cause of
orphans. Fight for
the rights of widows.

—Isaiah 1:17 (NLT)




Christian
Reformed
Church

Why Advocacy?

Transformational advocacy is a challenge to ourselves and our leaders to change attitudes, behaviors, and policies that perpetuate injustice and deny God's will for all creation to flourish.¹ Throughout Scripture, God calls people into community and sets the expectation that they care for one another. We reflect God's love when we call on leaders to protect the most vulnerable and marginalized people in our communities. As Christians we work toward a just world in which structures and institutions give every person the opportunity to thrive.

Scripture teaches us to defend the cause of the poor. Providing direct assistance to people in need is vital, but it is also important to guard against policies that oppress, to partner with marginalized communities for long-term change, and to speak up for policies that empower all people.

1 Micah Challenge USA definition of *advocacy*

The Biblical Basis for Advocacy

Jesus was compassionate to all people, especially the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the hungry, the poor, and the sick—the most vulnerable in society. Jesus loved all people—rich and poor—and actively cared for people in need. He urged his disciples to do the same.

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As Christians we strive to show God’s reconciling love at all times and in all places. God often speaks of our purpose to rebuild, restore, and renew all that is broken (Isaiah 61). We are called to work to end the brokenness in our communities, in our nation and in the world as a whole.

God loves justice (Isaiah 61:8; Psalm 33:5; 99:4) and requires us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8; Amos 5:22-24). Our individual actions and societal structures should enable all people to share in what God has provided.

The Bible contains inspiring examples of advocates. People such as Esther and Moses spoke alongside marginalized and oppressed people who were greatly affected by decisions made by people in power.



After fasting in the desert, Jesus went on to both directly serve and advocate for impoverished and marginalized people in his public ministry. In the same way Jesus' followers, in response to their relationship with God, are called to serve as advocates for systemic change. Standing with marginalized groups and advocating for a more just social order is an integral part of direct ministry. Jesus' teaching and example point us to the command "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39), which calls us to extend our compassion to neighbours throughout the world. While handouts can help individuals survive in an oppressive system, changing the system can ensure that all people have the opportunity to thrive. Jesus warned that the nations will be held accountable and judged for the

ways they have treated people who are marginalized. We steward our power by speaking and serving with strength (1 Peter 4:10-11).

The Bible also emphasizes the role and responsibility of leaders—and of believers in general—to care for the poor, the stranger, and the oppressed (Psalm 72; Exodus 22:21-23; Romans 13). Scripture suggests that our leaders should work for the good and well-being of all, whether or not they acknowledge that their authority comes from God. Christians can advocate for their government to protect and provide for all its people just as Paul exercised his power and privilege as a Roman citizen (Acts 21-26).

It can also be common for social justice advocates to appeal to Proverbs 31:8-9—the *voice for the voiceless* passage. An Indigenous leader once confronted church leaders who wanted to take part in Indigenous justice work. Using an appeal to this passage, he said to them, *With respect, I'm not voiceless; you are deaf*. Voicelessness is rare and justice advocates must take the time to listen before acting. Listening includes a commitment to working directly with people who experience injustice in order to confront the injustice together.

Advocacy Works

Part of an elected official's job is to listen to constituents. Because of this, Members of Parliament and provincial legislatures will welcome perspectives and input from you. Without feedback from constituents and from organizations that work directly with marginalized groups, officials may not modify their views or take action on a specific issue.

The Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB) cites many advocacy successes, such as the “untying” of food aid in 2008. In the past, Canadian policy required federally funded food aid programs to purchase at least 90 percent of the food in Canada. This often resulted in expensive transport costs, inappropriate foods, and slow response time for people in developing countries. International food aid was “tied” to domestic farm policy. Through meetings with Members of Parliament and other policy influencers in the Canadian government and through partnerships with Canadian farm groups, this policy was changed, permitting food aid to be purchased wherever it makes the most sense to do so, often as near as possible to the people who are hungry.

In our Christian faith we speak about stewarding time and money; part of stewardship is knowing that what we are doing is effective. Knowing that our elected officials listen when we use our voices to encourage change should empower us to lift our voices and advocate.

How to Advocate

Meet

An in-person meeting with your Member of Parliament or your member's staff is the most effective way to advocate and have an impact as a constituent. You can find your Member of Parliament online at parl.gc.ca/SenatorsMembers.aspx?Language=E.

A Member's search box is available on the front page of the website and will link you to contact information for constituency offices. You can request a meeting via phone or email. Elected representatives get many requests for meetings. Your request can stand out if you follow up your first call or e-mail with a second call to politely remind the staff of your meeting request.

In your meeting request, you should specify available dates, your desired location, a list of participants, and the subject of your meeting. Focusing on one issue in your meeting will be most effective.

Before the meeting, prepare by doing research on your Member's voting record and position on the issue you wish to discuss. You can search for your Member's voting record and see which legislation they have supported by searching for your Member at parl.gc.ca, clicking on your Member, and then clicking on the "work" tab. Many MP websites also profile the issues they are concerned about. It is helpful to do additional research

if necessary in order to answer any questions your member may have about your specific topic or request.

At the end of an in-person meeting, you should give your Member or staff person a *one-page brief*. This will ensure that the office has a record of your meeting, a way to follow up with you, and a clear request. The brief should

- clearly state what action you would like your Member to take following your meeting. The action could include voting for a specific bill, supporting or opposing a bill, making proactive suggestions for amendments, or supporting future actions on an issue.
- give brief relevant background information on the issue.
- list reasons in support of your requested course of action.
- restate your request at the end. It is most effective if the request is achievable and realistic for your Member and if it has a requested time frame in which it should be accomplished.
- include your contact information and any relevant history or connection you or your group has had with the issue.

When meeting with your MP, it is most effective to engage in dialogue and have a conversation rather than taking a confrontational approach. This can allow you to create a relationship with your Member, which can be very valuable in terms of accomplishing your requested action and building a long-term conversation about the issues you care about.

During the meeting you should be prepared to negotiate a bit in terms of your request. You will be more successful if you know what you need to stand firm on and what aspects you can be flexible with.

These meetings provide a great opportunity for you also to give back to your MP in terms of constituency interaction and education. You will be most effective if you can relate your request back to your constituency and local context. You could share what you learned from the MP meeting in a prayer request or in a small group at church.

It is also effective—and courteous—to send a thank-you note or email after a meeting, as a way for your meeting and request to be remembered and to stand out.

Write

Beyond the in-person meeting, studies show that handwritten, mailed letters, and personalized emails serve as the best ways to communicate with your Member of Parliament. You should make a clear request in only one or two paragraphs; your letter does not need to be lengthy to be powerful.

Members of Parliament can be emailed online through the Parliament website. Email is the fastest way to contact your legislator, other than calling. This is recommended if the subject of your message is time sensitive.

You can also mail a handwritten letter to your Member of Parliament. Their address can be found online through their website, usually under the “Contact” page. You do not need to pay for postage when writing your Member’s Parliamentary Address (House of Commons, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6).

Tips for writing to your MP:

- State your request in the first sentence. Your request should be specific, achievable, and time bound.
- Introduce yourself and explain your connection to the issue or your credentials.
- Give background and support for your request.
- List other supporters of your request and connect your request to your constituency.

When writing or calling, be sure to identify yourself as a constituent. You can do this by providing your postal code and address.

Attend

Many Members hold town hall meetings, fundraisers, debates, or other events. These can be effective events to attend in order to create a relationship with your MP and their staff. Town hall meetings and other events also provide important personal opportunities for you to become more involved in your local political context.

Town halls give you a chance to ask your Member a question in the public sphere. This can be an effective way to raise public awareness about your issue and



a way to hold your Member publicly accountable. You should realize, however, that this does put your Member on the spot. Asking your question in an open and friendly way can be more effective than posing a question that is accusatory or condemning.

Call

An effective and fast way to contact your Member of Parliament is by calling their office. You can find your Member of Parliament's phone number at parl.gc.ca/SenatorsMembers.aspx?Language=E.

The call will likely be answered by an office assistant in your member's office. You can tell this person that you are a constituent and that you would like to leave a message for your MP. Then clearly state the message you would like your Member to receive, whether it is in

support of or in opposition to a specific bill, or it is a request to take a specific action.

You can also ask to speak to a staff person who works on the specific issue about which you are calling. You can say, for example, “I am a constituent; could I please speak with the staff person who works on Indigenous issues?” If you are not able to speak with a staff person, you can still leave your message with the office assistant. Either method is a sure way to get your message to your MP.

Offices track calls and messages. Your call can have a real impact on your Member’s position on an issue.

Post

Social media is another great way to use your voice to promote change. You can use Facebook, Twitter, your blog, Instagram, and other social media tools to create awareness among your friends and invite them to join in advocating for just policies and systems. You can also use social media to communicate with your Member on issues you are passionate about. To find your legislator’s social media information, visit this list of social media contacts for Canadian Members of Parliament: politwitter.ca/page/canadian-politics-tweets/mp/house. There are several ways to communicate with your MP:

- **Facebook:** Find your Member’s Facebook page and write on their wall or tag them in your posts about an issue. Following your legislators on Facebook is also a

way you can stay informed about what issues they are voting on.

- **Twitter:** Find your Member on Twitter. Find their handle and tweet at him/her. If you are starting the tweet with their handle, be sure to put a period in front of it so that other Twitter users will also see your tweet. Otherwise, Twitter will treat it like a direct tweet. You can also find hashtags that relate to the issue you are talking about and add them to your post to add your voice to the general Twitter conversation around that hashtag.
- **Blog:** Share your thoughts on an issue on your blog and send policymakers the link.

Partner

You can also partner with advocacy organizations to help in communicating with your Member of Parliament. You can ask for their help in arranging a meeting, with talking points, and with advocacy tips. You can also let them know what advocacy initiatives you have undertaken. Organizations are eager to hear stories of community members becoming involved in advocacy.

We recommend you contact the following organizations:

- the Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue — crcna.ca/publicdialogue
- the Canadian Foodgrains Bank — foodgrainsbank.ca
- the Office of Social Justice — crcna.org/justice
- World Renew — worldrenew.net
- KAIROS — kairoscanada.org/
- Citizens for Public Justice — cpj.ca/

Listen and Build

You don't have to advocate alone. As you partner with agencies and connect with your MP, look for opportunities to invite others from your community to join you. If you have a friendship with someone who is affected by the specific issue you are working on, you could invite that person to join you and play a leading role in the advocacy process.

Tips for Effective Advocacy

- In all communication with your representatives, be sure to include your postal address, with a postal code, as well as your email address. Your postal address helps show that you are a constituent.
- Personalize your message. A personal and thoughtful letter is much more effective than a generic letter.
- Be informative. Explain why the issue is important, and include your personal experience, stories, and knowledge.
- Be respectful and constructive. Governing is challenging, and elected representatives get plenty of loud criticism. Come prepared to listen and to suggest alternatives that leaders can use.
- Be concise. Your meeting, letter, or message does not need to be long to make a difference. You can state your request clearly in two paragraphs or in a few main points.
- Request specific action. Give the name of legislation or specific bill numbers that correspond with your request. Remember also to give your Member of

Parliament a one-page brief that includes your request. Be sure also to follow up if you called or sent a letter, or to say thank-you after a meeting.

For Further Reading on Advocacy:

- Sussman, Amanda. *The Art of the Possible: A Handbook for Social Activists*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007.
- Citizens for Public Justice Advocacy Toolkit: cpj.ca/cpjs-advocacy-toolkit.
- *Live Justly*, an in-depth scriptural and practical study to help people live justly in six key areas of life: worldrenew.net/livejustly.
- Kairos Canada webinars on Letters to the Editor and other helpful skills: kairoscanada.org/what-we-do/indigenous-rights/windsofchange-updates.
- Samara Canada offers resources on Canada's electoral process: samaracanada.com. Samara Canada also offers a curriculum guide for teachers: samaracanada.com/samara-in-the-classroom.

