

Chapter Three: Public Policy Advocacy

As I mentioned above, public policy issue deserves a special attention in a special chapter of its own.

What is public policy? Webster Dictionary defines: “Policy” as a “definite course or method of action selected from among alternatives and in light of given conditions to guide and determine present and future decisions: A high-level overall plan embracing the general goal and acceptable procedures especially of a governmental body.”¹ Watkins describes,

Politics is simply the way that people relate to one another in order to accomplish something. All of us know how to relate to others in order to get something done. There are politics in our families, school, neighborhoods, and church. Political skills are interpersonal skills. What most people call politics is really the public policy process. The public policy process places politics and power in the public arena. The public policy process is the way that society sets community norms, often through legislation.²

For Yoder, to be political is to make decisions, to assign roles, and to distribute powers. Politics affirms a recognition that we deal with matters of power, of rank and of money, and of costly decisions. The difference between church and state or between a faithful and an unfaithful church is not that one is political and the other not, but that they are political in different ways.³

Kawachi and Kennedy, Harvard professors, claim,

the kind of society we live in is the product of the political process, including the well-being of its citizens. Politics determine what sorts of policies are pursued by democratic government, for instance, the choice between policies that give priority to promoting economic growth versus those that emphasize a more egalitarian distribution of national income. Or the choice between more or less government involvement in the economy. Or choice over the size of the welfare state and the level of social spending to assure basic human security in areas such as education, health, and social safety nets.⁴

However, we hear quite often Christians say, “Politics and the Gospel don’t mix” or “faith is a spiritual matter and has nothing to do with politics.” Many also claim that politics is about secular matters, the ways of the world, and faith is about the sacred, the salvation of our souls. The church should stay out of politics because the two deal in different realms. Government welfare and poverty programs, for instance, are not the concern of the church. Our commitment to the poor should be expressed in deeds of private charity and through humanitarian groups. Therefore, while many Christian churches have been generous in charity few churches seem to be motivated to attack the root cause of homelessness. While some Christians, other faith groups and individuals are trying to change public policies, too many of them seem to keep silence on unjust economic policies. After all, homelessness is the result of unjust economic policies (refer to volume one by Jean Kim). **We must seek a permanent solution by being actively involved in public policy advocacy.**

Lutheran Public Policy Office of Washington State defines advocacy:

An advocate is one who pleads on another’s behalf; one who argues for a cause; one summoned to give evidence. *Advocacy* is using what God has given us to help our neighbors in need. It includes direct actions of charity and justice as well as intentional activity which help builds a more just society. There is a sacramental connection that comes with the Latin root meaning of *ad-vocare* (*ad*-meaning-

¹ Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, Inc., Publishers (Springfield, MA. 1985), 910.

² Jim Watkins, *Making a Difference in the Public Arena* (Louisville: Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. 1993), 5.

³ John Howard Yoder, in Introduction, *Body Politics* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1992), ix.

⁴ Ichiro Kawachi and Bruce P. Kennedy, *the Health of Nations - Why Inequality Is Harmful to Your Health* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 161.

to, vocare-meaning-call). Another English word we get from this Latin root is *vocation* or our *calling* in life. An advocate is called just as a Christian is called by God.⁵

According to the Common Good, human need is often caused by injustice; charity becomes necessary because the public order leads to inequalities and exploitation. Poverty is, in part, a problem of social injustice, and if we change institutions that create or sustain it, we will remove much of the need for charity. For instance, the impersonal workings of the economic system cause undeserved deprivation that can be corrected through governmental policies; long-standing patterns of racial discrimination still leave us with institutional causes of poverty; deep cultural biases disparage minorities and women in ways that might be changed in part through concerted educational programs.⁶ The newsletter of the Bread for the World, carried the following statement:

Many churches provide emergency assistance for the needy but these compassionate efforts alone cannot end poverty, hunger and homelessness. Our government has the ability to make the economic, social and political decisions necessary to attack the deep structural causes of poverty, hunger and homelessness. As people of faith and conscience, we can and should remind leaders of their responsibilities to their people and offer constructive alternatives. We can bring about public policy changes that will end hunger and poverty in our lifetimes. It's not a difficult thing to do, and it doesn't take a lot of time. It just takes the will to act and speak out on behalf of hungry, poor and homeless people.⁷

Howard Moody once said that a city is dying when it has an eye for real estate values but has lost its heart for personal value, when it has an understanding of traffic flow but little concern about the flow of human beings, when we have increasing competence in buildings, but less and less time for housing and ethical codes, when human values are absent at the heart of a city's decision making, planning and the execution of its plans in the process. However, many Christians believe that the church and state must be separated and they are reluctant to participate in public policy advocacy. Some Christians misunderstand "the separation of the church and state." Jim Wallis quotes Stephen Carter, an African American and constitutional lawyer, who is also a Yale law professor who claims that "the American doctrine of the separation of the church and state forbids the establishment of any religion *by the states* but not the influence of religious values in the public square." Along with others, such as historian Garry Willis, Carter suggests that "religious faith has always helped shape American politics and that such influence can serve very positive as well as terribly negative ends."⁸

The Confession of 1967 of the Presbyterian Church (USA) clearly states: The members of the church are emissaries of peace and seek the good of man [people] in cooperation with powers and authorities in politics, culture, and economics. But they have to fight against pretensions and injustices when these same powers endanger human welfare. Their strength is in their confidence that God's purpose rather than man's schemes will finally prevail (9.25).

Watkins clearly explains why the Church must be involved in public policy advocacy:

Persons of faith are involved in the public arena because politics has a place in: 1) Scripture, reformed theology and ministry. Scripture gives examples of persons of faith being involved in the public arena: Moses stood before Pharaoh asking that the public policy of Egypt be changed, so that the children of Israel would be free. Jesus gathered the nations and asked that their priorities be set so that the "least of these" would be cared for. 2) Reformed theology teaches that because a sovereign God is at work in all the world, the church and Christian citizens should be concerned

⁵ Brochure of the Washington Lutheran Public Policy Office. 2005.

⁶ "Charity and Social Justice," in *Faith and Public Issues: Protestants for the Common Good* (Chicago, 1997), 2. Alexander E. Sharp, Executive Director. 77 West Washington St. Suite 1124, Chicago, IL. 60602. Tel: (312) 223-9544. Fax: (312) 223-9540. www.thecommongood.org

⁷ Bread for the World Newsletter, May 2006, Advocacy 101, P. 2. (50 F Street NW, Suite 500, Washington D.C. 20001. Phone: 1-800-82-Bread/ Fax: (202) 639-9401. E-mail: bread@bread.org. www.bread.org

⁸ Jim Wallis, *the Souls of Politics* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Co., 1995), 38.

about forming public policy. The state is a gift of God, given to ensure order, well-being, and peace. To Calvin, “Civil majesty is a calling not only holy and legitimate, but by far the most sacred and honorable in human life.” The ultimate allegiance of Christians and the Church is to God. If any government requires us to violate our obligation to God, Christians should remain loyal to God. 3) The practice of ministry leads us into the public arena. As we help people in need, we often find that social systems have to be changed. Social systems are changed through public policy decisions that lead to legislation that orders society.⁹

The Common Good defines the purpose of political decisions; “It refers to the ways the community promotes the well-being of all individuals through protecting liberty and free association, producing and distributing economic benefits, offering education, enriching the cultural heritage, and providing for political participation. As Christians, we affirm that politics should seek to maximize the common good that is equally available to all. Laws and policies are just when they promote our common life as something that both enriches and is enriched by the flourishing of each individual.”¹⁰

Miller introduces what socially responsible ministry involves, to be found in the report of a seminar held at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington DC, 1987:

1) Socially Responsible Ministry involves a “radical critique” of society, depending in part on careful listening to the oppressed. 2) Socially Responsible Ministry is a liberating ministry that emerges concretely out of the oppressed community. 3) Socially Responsible Ministry requires social analysis. It demands personal, institutional, and ecclesial self-critique. It is not the same focusing on social issues. 4) Socially Responsible Ministry features struggle for liberation of the oppressed. 5) Socially Responsible Ministry follows the logic of *missio dei*, the mission of God, in its wholeness, and participates in the unified mission of the church. 6) Socially Responsible Ministry is oriented to doing justice, making peace, and caring for creation. It requires walking with the oppressed in shared ministry and in working for social policy change. It affirms the communal nature of human existence and is expressed in all basic functions of the church. 7) Socially Responsible Ministry requires “solidarity” – loyalty to disregarded people, not ideological causes. It is rooted in spirituality and love, guided by the vision of shalom. It requires critical analysis and institutional reform.¹¹

Harper relates the socially responsible ministry to justice issue:

While we need to do charity through specialized organizations, often there is a strong tendency toward establishing a permanent underclass of alienated, marginalized, apathetic people. It must be acknowledged that social service helps millions of people cope with immediate emergencies, and provides helpful short-term assistance to people struggling with urgent problems. In a complex modern society a social safety net is a real necessity. Its major limitations are that it focuses on aiding people to adjust, adapt, and cope with the existing conditions. It does not challenge root causes of human misery and social injustice. It tends to create dependency and dehumanization and encourages the mentality of victimization. It becomes a central components in the welfare culture. It does not adequately emphasize a sense of responsibility for changing basic conditions.

Changing policies, structures, and behaviors that are at the root of injustice is the focus of systemic justice. Efforts to change the large-scale systems that have great influence on the lives of persons and groups involve the conscious use of political and economic power. The emphasis is on distributive equity, and empowering groups of people to take charge of their own lives. At this level, consciousness shifts from being a victim to becoming a participant in shaping society in a more humane fashion. In a religious frame of reference, love operating as justice at the societal level helps to unveil the pretensions and social fictions by which injustice is maintained. Justice is understood

⁹ Watkins, *Making Difference*, 3-4.

¹⁰ “The Common Good”, in *Faith and Public Issues: Protestants for the Common Good* (Chicago, 1997), 1.

¹¹ Haskell M. Miller, *Social Ministry* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 31.

to move beyond the purely personal realm into the institutional realm where people power can be mobilized over against entrenched institutional power. Therefore, social justice focuses on basic cause of oppression, inequity, and disenfranchisement. It seeks to change public policy and public priorities. Therefore, systemic justice by its nature involve political action, mobilizing voting power, creating common interest alliances, and building cooperative collations.¹²

Let us look at what the U.S. Government Policies for the poor/homeless have been:

There are several policies dealing with homelessness. In 1980 the government decided to start providing funding to the homeless, but it was not until 1984 that shelters were built to accommodate and feed them. As it was shown though, seventy percent required the homeless to attend a religious ceremony and spend only a couple of nights there. In the 1987 McKinney Act the problem with homelessness became known as a huge social problem.

Later on, the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 amended the program explicitly to prohibit states that receive McKinney-Vento funds from segregating homeless students from non-homeless students, except for short periods of time for health and safety emergencies or to provide temporary, special, supplementary services.

The Chronic Homelessness Initiative.

The Bush Administration established a national goal of ending chronic homelessness in ten years, by 2012. The idea of a 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness began as a part of a 10-year plan to end homelessness in general adopted by the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#) (NAEH) in 2000.

The following year, then-Secretary Martinez announced HUD's commitment to ending chronic homelessness at the NAEH annual conference. In 2002, as a part of his FY2003 budget, President Bush made "ending chronic homelessness in the next decade a top objective." The bi-partisan, congressionally mandated, Millennial Housing Commission, in its Report to Congress in 2002, included ending chronic homelessness in 10 years among its principal recommendations. By 2003, the Interagency Council on Homelessness had been re-engaged and charged with pursuing the President's 10-year plan. The Administration has recently undertaken some collaborative efforts to reach its goal of ending chronic homelessness in 10 years. On October 1, 2003, the Administration announced the award of over \$48 million in grants aimed at serving the needs of the chronically homeless through two initiatives. The "Ending Chronic Homelessness through Employment and Housing" initiative was a collaborative grant offered jointly by HUD and the Department of Labor (DOL).-The initiative offered \$10 million from HUD and \$3.5 million from DOL to help the chronically homeless in five communities gain access to employment and permanent housing. Section 8 is the core housing program that helps extremely low-income families accommodate the gap between their incomes below 30 percent of the median income for each community. The government assists homeless families by awarding grants and vouchers. Vouchers are available to the families who are most needy and they are used to pay for housing found in the private market. Currently there are policy changes in who receives vouchers and there will be a reduction in the amount of vouchers granted to the homeless population.

On May 20, 2009, President [Barack Obama](#) signed the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009. The HEARTH Act amends and reauthorizes the [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#) with substantial changes. The HEARTH Act of 2009 consolidated HUD's competitive grant programs, created a Rural Housing Stability Program, changed HUD's definition of homelessness and chronic homelessness, supplied a simplified match requirement, increased prevention resources and increased the emphasis on performance. The primary purpose of the legislation was to provide principal definitions regarding homelessness. The

¹² Nile Harper, *Urban Churches* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 300-301.

following terms were used: "homeless," "homeless individual," "homeless person," and "homeless individual with a disability."

[Housing First](#) is a relatively recent innovation that has met with success in providing housing to homeless people with substance abuse problems or mental health issues. Housing First allows homeless men and women to be taken directly off the street into private community-based apartments, without requiring treatment first. This allows the homeless to return to some sense of normalcy, from which it is believed that they are better-poised to tackle their addictions or sicknesses. The relapse rate through these types of programs is lower than that of conventional homeless programs. It was initiated by the federal government's Interagency Council on Homelessness. It asks cities to come up with a plan to end chronic homelessness. In this direction, there is the belief that if homeless people are given independent housing to start off with, with some proper social supports, then there would be no need for emergency homeless shelters, which it considers a good outcome. This is a very controversial position. There are many complications of this kind of program.¹³

Due to these policy changes and hard work of advocates, there has been a significant paradigm shift; the emphasis from "managing the problem of homelessness" with emergency shelters, soup kitchens and health clinic to ending homelessness by housing individuals who are experiencing homelessness.

In 2000, the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#) released "*A Plan, Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years*" which encouraged communities to develop and implement 10-year plans to end homelessness in their communities. Key effective programs include: 1) Shelter Plus Care – a federal program that provides housing subsidies and are matched by local funds to provide long-term supportive services (typically case management). Experience demonstrated that many individuals who have been homeless for a significant time often lose their housing shortly after placement. The Shelter Plus Care program provides long-term supports including working with the landlord to keep the individual housed. 2) [Housing First](#) – a service paradigm that assumes that individuals who are homeless are "ready" to be housed immediately and with appropriate supports can retain their housing. The [Pathways to Housing](#) project in New York demonstrated a five-year housing retention rate of 88 percent among formerly homeless individuals with serious mental illness. Homeless people seeking help are often required to participate in substance abuse, mental health, and life skills programs of a year or more regardless of whether those are factors in their case. Many people only need decent housing to get back on their feet. Central City Concern's (Portland, Oregon) Shoreline Project allows homeless unemployed men to move into SRO type single person studios and find a job within 70 days; it's been a great success with expected expansion of the program in 2007. 3) Assertive Outreach – a form of engagement and outreach that emphasizes building a bond of trust between the case worker and the individual. Engagement is highly individualized with the pace dictated by the individual in need. Case workers do not force rules, regulations or program services until they are requested. Typically used to engage homeless, mentally ill individuals.

There are still many policy issues for us to work with:

In our public policy advocacy work we can pay and demand decent wages. We can vote for economic policies that express ethical concern for the interests of all parties involved. We can stay aware and oppose unfair employment practices, wages, or discriminatory treatment of any kind. We

¹³ From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

can reject social class attitudes and cultivate attitudes of compassion and caring. We can stay on guard against paternalism and seek ways of actively identifying with those who need our help. We can be, and ought to be, advocates for the poor.¹⁴ We are part of the problem and must be the part of the solution too.

The effect of public policy change will bring systemic justice. Harper claims, Changing policies, structures, and behaviors that are at the root of injustice is the focus of systemic justice. Efforts to change the large-scale systems that have great influence on the lives of persons and groups involve the conscious use of political and economic power. The emphasis is on distributive equity, and empowering groups of people to take charge of their own lives. At this level, consciousness shifts from being a victims to becoming a participants in shaping society in a more humane fashion. In a religious frame of reference, love operating as justice at the societal level helps to unveil the pretensions and social fictions by which injustice is maintained. Justice is understood to move beyond the purely personal realm into the institutional realm where people power can be mobilized over against entrenched institutional power. Therefore, social justice focuses on basic cause of oppression, inequity, and disenfranchisement. It seeks to change public policy and public priorities. It works to empower people to take initiatives in ways that are positive and constructive.¹⁵

HOW TO DO PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY

Many people might be reluctant to be involved in public policy advocacy because they might not know where to start or think it is very difficult. It is, in fact, rather easier than offering direct services to the homeless and more effective in bringing changes. Legislators and public officers whom we elected are more than willing to hear from us.

Initial Steps¹⁶

Step 1: Study: We need to deepen our thought about justice and the common good as these are clarified by the Christian faith – and to understand the alternative ideals that seek the allegiance of our fellow citizens. Bible study can help with this. Find perspectives in our Christian tradition and in our wider American life. We need to educate ourselves about the details of contemporary social, political, and economic issues so that we can relate Christian convictions to particular political proposals: getting to know issues, the candidates, and their position.

Step 2: Discernment: We use our conscience in discerning how faith in God relates to particular political problems. Through prayer and worship, we can seek to release our conscience from selfish goals and narrow opinions so that we are free to listen with open minds, admit when we are wrong, stand firm when we are right, and be guided in our deliberations and decisions by God’s purpose.

Step 3: Action: We use our hands and feet as well as our voices to make the seeds of study and discernment bear fruit. There are many ways to make a real difference. We can participate in registration drives, voter education or elections. We can urge elected representatives to consider the common good in relation to specific issues through our letters, faxes, and calls. We can discuss issues with our friends and urge them to take action. We can become members of and give support to organizations whose political purposes agree with ours.

¹⁴ Miller, *Social Ministry*, 29.

¹⁵ Harper. *Urban Churches*, 300.

¹⁶ “Public Participation and Welfare Reform” in Faith and Public Issues, *Protestants for the Common Good* (Chicago, 1997), 2-3.

Concrete guideline for public policy advocacy: ¹⁷

1) Gain access to elected officials and their staffs through building long-term relationships. 2) Organize a significant number of persons of faith to communicate with elected officials and their staffs. 3) Communicating effectively with other people requires: a) Sensitivity to where they are. b) Clarity about what we want. c) A recognition that there may be compromise.

Communicating effectively: Remember that you are all politicians. Every day we relate to many different people in order to get things done or to keep things from happening: 1) we recognize where the other person is. 2) Clearly state where we are.

A Congressman has two major functions: 1) He or she helps constituents as individuals and groups solve problems with the federal government. 2) He or she also represents constituents as public policy is being made. All elected officials have the same two basic functions that U.S. Congresspersons and Senators have – forming good public policy and helping constituents solve problems with the government. Sometimes the most valuable allies we have can have are the staff.

Forms of direct communication: Involves letter writing, telephoning, visiting, attending town hall meetings, etc. Indirect communication involves writing letters to the editor, submitting op-ed pieces to newspapers, calling talk shows, getting a spot on television, etc. Indirect communication helps form the milieu, the general sense of the public that is the backdrop for forming public policy.

Letter writing: 1) A salutation – Say something nice. 2) Your credentials – You are first of all a constituent (which translates into voter). Then you are a parent, student, homemaker, minister, teacher, and physician. 3) A message – State clearly what you are writing about, why you are writing about it and what position you would like the elected official to take. 4) Request for a response. 4) Express appreciation for the work of the official.

Effective letters are one page and tightly focused on one issue or piece of legislation. It is generally best not to refer to a group that has asked you to write. What an elected official is looking for is a broad-based consensus among his or her constituency.

Visitation: 1) Say something nice. 2) Introduce yourself using the same criteria as the letter. 3) Say you are concerned about this and such because4) You are wondering where the official is on the issue. 5) Thank the official very much for his or her time. 6) An optimum number of people to visit an elected official are three.

Phone calls: For congressional offices, phone calls have the greatest impact if there is a large number of them and if they are made when an important decision is about to be made. State and local officials often prefer phone calls to letters because they do not have staff that can quickly respond to letters. Persons or groups who want to be effective in communicating with public officials and their staff are always in touch with them.

Any presbytery, synod, or congregation would be well served by having a subgroup with responsibility for equipping persons to communicate with public officials who do long-range planning. Make your denominational public policy office your source for public policy issues; for example, Washington Office for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or Lutheran Public Policy Office of the Washington State, etc. Join Ecumenical Council or Church Women United in your city and work together with them.

Hold an Offering of Letters for your Congregation, Campus or Community Group ¹⁸

What's even better than a personal letter to Congress? A collection of personal letters to Congress. The complexity of hunger, poverty and homelessness carries the risk of dispersing our energy over an enormous range of problems and policies. Organizing a group to hold an Offering of Letters is one

¹⁷ Watkins, *Making Difference*, 7-31.

¹⁸ The Bread for the World Newsletter, May 2006, Advocacy 101, P. 2. (50 F Street NW, Suite 500, Washington D.C. 20001. Phone: 1-800-82-Bread/ Fax: (202) 639-9401. E-mail: bread@bread.org. www.bread.org

of the most effective actions you can take to reduce hunger, poverty and homelessness. At church, perhaps the pastor, members of the social action committee, or Sunday school teachers could help promote the Offering of Letters with a sermon, “moment for mission” presentation or Sunday school class. Publicize the letter writing event in the campus or church newsletters, bulletin boards or Websites. At your letter-writing table, have plenty of paper, envelopes and pens, along with copies of the latest sample letter. If you wish, the completed letters can be collected and brought forward in worship for dedication.

Lobbying:¹⁹

Thinking of yourself as a lobbyist may seem intimidating, but lobbying really comes down to talking to your Member of Congress or a staff person about an issue of concern to you. As a housing advocate, you can and should lobby your Congressional delegation. It is important to remember that you do not have to be an expert on housing policy to lobby. The experience and information you can provide on the housing situation in your Member's district is very valuable to him or her. Indeed, you are the expert when it comes to what is going on in your own district or state. And it is the responsibility of Members of Congress and their staffers to be responsive to the concerns of their constituents.

A face-to-face meeting with a Senator or Congressperson is often the most effective way to get your voice heard. However, given the schedule of most Members, you may end up meeting with the staff person who deals with housing issues. Do not be disappointed if this is the case. Staffers have significant input into many policy decisions, so getting to know the staff person and building a relationship with him or her is crucial.

Setting the meeting: If you know you will be visiting D.C., call in advance for an appointment. If you do not know your Member's phone number, call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121 and ask to be transferred. Ask to meet with your Member or his or her staff person who works on housing issues. Tell the person who sets up your appointment: 1) where you are from and what organization you represent; 2) the purpose of the meeting; and 3) the number of people who will be attending the meeting. You may be asked to fax in a request for the meeting rather than giving the information over the phone. Write a short note to the staff person you will meet with to confirm the meeting date, time and purpose and to send any information you think would be useful for the Member or staff person to review in advance. The day before the visit, call to confirm the appointment.

Planning the Meeting

A planned meeting will be a more relaxed and productive. Before you go, set an agenda based on how much time you have—usually no more than 20 minutes or half an hour. Decide what issues you'd like to discuss (usually no more than two or three), how to frame your message positively, and what specific action or actions you would like your Member to take. Unless you have met with them before, do not assume that Members and staff understand the problem. It is best to start with a description of the problem in your community, and then move on to solutions. In deciding how to frame your message, it helps to know your Member's professional interests and personal concerns, including Congressional committee assignments, memberships and affiliations (often listed on a

¹⁹ National Low Income Housing Coalition.

Member's website). This may help you gauge what your Member's priorities are and why he or she should be interested in what you have to say. It also helps to know how your member voted on housing issues. You can review roll call votes on key bills at <http://thomas.loc.gov>. If the Member's record is favorable, remember to acknowledge his or her past support during the meeting. If a record is unfavorable, remember that today's opponent may be tomorrow's ally.

The meeting: Be punctual! Security at the House and Senate office buildings can be tight and, if there are hearings or other events in those buildings, the lines to enter the building can be long, so be sure to allow extra time. Be sure also to leave behind items that may trigger a security concern. Before closing the meeting, summarize any agreements reached and any follow up that must be done. Leave the relevant materials. Thank the Member or the staff person for his or her time.

Following your visit: Send a letter to your Member and his or her staff thanking them for their time and reaffirming your views and any agreements made in the meeting. Send any information or materials you agreed to provide. If you lobbied on an issue being tracked by your state coalition or NLIHC, report the results of the meeting to them. This is especially crucial on an issue such as the National Housing Trust Fund. Monitor your Member's actions on your issue. Continue to communicate with him or her as the issue advances. Handwritten letters can be especially effective. If you are having a meeting of agency staff, board members, clients, etc., start the meeting by handing out blank paper and having everyone take 10 minutes to handwrite a letter to his or her Member. You can provide a sample letter, but encourage people to describe the problem as they see it. Collect the letters and then fax and mail them over the course of a few days.

Address letters as follows:

Senate

The Honorable (full name)
Attn: Housing Staffer
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

House

The Honorable (full name)
Attn: Housing Staffer
United States House of Rep.
Washington, DC 20515

CALLING YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS

The days before a key vote or hearing are critical decision times and an especially effective time to call. A Member of Congress may be contacted through the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121.

EMAILING YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS: Unless you are using an email service like the one on the NLIHC website, it is generally not a good idea to attempt to correspond with your Member using email. Members can receive upwards of 50,000 emails a month and many of these messages will never be read by the appropriate staff. But once you have established a relationship with a staff person and have that staff person's direct email address, email can be an easy and effective way to keep in touch.

OTHER

ADVOCACY

IDEAS:

Visits, letters and calls are not the only ways to communicate your positions to Congress. You can also: 1) Invite your Member or Senator to speak at your annual meeting or conference. 2) Organize a tour for your Member of your organization's projects that feature real people telling their success stories. 3) Get media coverage. Organize a tour for a local reporter, or set up a press conference to tie your issue into a local event. You can also call in to radio talk shows and write letters to the editor

of your local paper. Or call your newspaper's editorial page editor and set up a meeting to discuss the possibility of the paper's support for your issue. If you get editorial or other press coverage, be sure to send the clippings to your Member's office. 4) Elicit the support of potential allies who are influential with your Member such as your city council, mayor, local business or religious leaders.

In short, the above hints given by several experts may motivate and encourage the Church in engaging in public policy advocacy.

Checklist for letters to Congress ²⁰

1) Include your street address. Otherwise, the office has no way of knowing that you are a constituent. 2) Personalize your message. As one House correspondence staff person put it, "One hundred form letters have less direct value than a single thoughtful letter generated by a constituent." We are writing to persuade senators and representatives to take action against hunger, poverty and homelessness, widespread but solvable human problems. 3) Be concise. Letters do not have to be long or elaborate to make a difference. Express your request clearly in one or two paragraphs. 4) Request specific action. When possible, give the name of pending legislation or specific bill numbers. 5) Be informative. Tell your members of Congress why this issue is important. Draw on your own experience and knowledge to make the letter your own.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), according to George E. Todd:

"From the beginning of Presbyterianism in the 16th century in Geneva, Reformed theology and practice have strongly emphasized the responsibility of the church to shape the civic order of society; faith in a sovereign God actively at work creating, governing, judging and redeeming society in and through civic institutions impelled a response by the church to issues of urban life. Calvin drew up a constitution, a system of church and civil governance. This precedent led Presbyterians to be active in shaping American institutions; many Presbyterians were signers of the American Constitution. Commitment to shaping the civil order guided by this theological vision is the basis of the Presbyterian approach to urban ministry."

DOES ADVOCACY WORK?

Recent research by the Congressional Management Foundation confirms that advocacy does make a difference. Virtually all the Capitol Hill staff surveyed (96 percent) reported that if their member of Congress had not reached a firm decision on an issue, individualized letters would influence the member's position. ²¹

WHEN IS THE BEST TIME? ²²

Any time is a good time to communicate with your member of Congress. Writing or holding an Offering of Letters early in the year is particularly effective as we urge legislators to introduce and cosponsor hunger/poverty/ housing related bills. Key budget decisions are also made relatively early in the year. Congressional staff report that letters from constituents are "particularly helpful or influential early on in a decision- making process, when members and staff are researching and developing policy positions." However useful letters can be written all year long. Once you have written a letter or held an Offering of Letters, it's helpful to follow up as your legislators reply and as more policy and budget decisions are made.

- Once a bill is introduced, you have an opportunity to urge your senators and

²⁰ The Bread for the World Newsletter, May 2006, *Advocacy 101*, P. 2. (50 F Street NW, Suite 500, Washington D.C. 20001. Phone: 1-800-82-Bread/ Fax: (202) 639-9401. E-mail: bread@bread.org. www.bread.org

²¹ The Bread for the World Newsletter, May 2006, *Advocacy 101*, 2. (50 F Street NW, Suite 500, Washington D.C. 20001. Phone: 1-800-82-Bread/ Fax: (202) 639-9401. E-mail: bread@bread.org. www.bread.org

²² The Bread for the World Newsletter, May 2006, *Advocacy 101*, 3.

representatives to cosponsor it.

- You can thank them for their support once they sign on.

People might say we are doing enough already. Yes. A Presbyterian survey reported 95% of the Presbyterians are doing something to help the poor. I am sure other faith traditions do as much as any others are doing. However, the survey of suburban congregations in six cities of the District of Columbia and Maryland/Virginia witnessed that 60% of faith-based providers are sponsoring feeding programs. However, Gap Analysis did not identify feeding and clothing as a high priority. It identified housing, jobs, job training, life skills programs, mental health counseling, child care, youth services, after care, etc. as high priority. This means that faith communities should be engaged in prevention and solution of homelessness.

While we celebrate all that we have been doing, we must move beyond where we are because demand for service continues unabated. The homeless cannot live by bread alone. The Presbyterian campaign has urged every church open one room to welcome the homeless, to become partners in developing permanent housing, and to join the public policy advocacy. We must challenge policy makers for the fact that the federal budget to help the poor is categorized as “*discretionary*,” meaning it can be slashed or increased at the discretion of the policy makers whether cutting funds for the poor is detrimental to their survival or not. We must challenge our policy makers to make the assistance for the poor a *mandatory*, discretionary, and to spend more of our tax money to develop many more comprehensive rehabilitation program including housing, education, job training, more jobs, child care, after care, health care, etc.

There are many policy issues but here are a few example we should know:

Incarceration policy:

The United States has less than 5% of the world's population, yet has 25% of the world's prisoners, which ranks the U.S. as having the highest incarceration rate in the world. The majority of U.S. prisoners are incarcerated for drug-related crimes (Sojourner magazine, May-June 2003). At the end of 2003, there were 1,470,045 men and women in state and federal prisons in the United States. In addition, counting those inmates in city and county jails and incarcerated juvenile offenders, the total number of Americans behind bars was 2,212,475 on Dec. 31, 2003. According to Angela Browne, a research scientist at Harvard and Judith Herman, MD, the number of female prisoners has quadrupled in the past 10 years. Women prisoners are the fastest growing segment of incarcerated persons. Seattle Times of November 8, 2004 also reported that the number of women in state and federal prisons is an all-time high and growing fast, with their incarceration rate increasing at nearly twice that of men. There were 101,170 women in prisons in 2003. (Seattle Times of November 8, 2004). The continuing increase in the prison population is a result of laws passed in the 1990's that led to more prison sentences and longer terms, said Allen J. Beck, chief for the Correction Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Few of those who return to our communities every day are prepared for their release or receive supportive services. One-third of all corrections departments provide no funds to prisoners upon release. Many of those leaving jail and prison have chronic health issues, no housing, little education or job training, and generally lack resources to allow them to reintegrate. While research shows that these supportive services are critical to an individual's safe and successful reentry, existing barriers make it difficult, if not impossible, for people with criminal records to access them.

One study found that more than half of those released from New York state prisons to New York City from 1995 to 1998 entered a homeless shelter in the first month. As a result of these and other barriers to successful reentry, according to a 2002 study by the Justice Department, sixty-seven percent of persons released from state prisons were arrested for a new crime within the first three years after release.

People with Criminal Records Denied Access to Public Housing. Decent and stable housing is essential for human survival and dignity, a principle affirmed both in U.S. policy and international human rights law. The United States provides federally subsidized housing to millions of low-income people who could not otherwise afford homes on their own. However, often U.S. public housing policies exclude many needy people with criminal records.

One-Strike Policy:

One strike, you're out is a colloquial term for a policy which allows tenants living in housing projects or otherwise receiving housing assistance from the federal government to be [evicted](#) if they, or any guest or visitor under their more-or-less direct control, engage in certain types of criminal activity on or, in some cases, even off the premises of said housing. This term is used because housing authorities do not have to offer a second chance. Policies mandating criminal record exclusions, generally called "one strike" policies, were developed in the 1990s as an attempt to address drug trafficking, violent crime, and disorder in public housing, especially urban high-rise developments. Congress incorporated the one-strike policy into federal housing law.

Today, federal law bans three categories of people from admission to public housing: those who have been convicted of methamphetamine production on the premises of federally funded housing, who are banned for life; those subject to lifetime registration requirements under state sex offender registration programs; and people who are currently using illegal drugs, even those with no criminal records. The law is unnecessarily harsh and punitive (Human Rights Watch –October 26, 2004 – No Second Chance)

Discharging them into the community without much after-care can become a huge policy concern. They need to come out of prison with good plan – supportive housing, jobs or job training/educational opportunity, health care etc.

Second Chance Legislation:

Office of Justice Programs reports on the Second Chance Act legislation: **This is a good news. I remember sending petitions to policy makers 10 years ago. Finally the Second Chance Act is legislature in to a law under government funding:**

The Second Chance Act, Community Safety through Recidivism Prevention is federal legislation designed to ensure the safe and successful return of prisoners to the community. Each year, as approximately 650,000 people are released from state and federal prisons and between 10 and 12 million more are released from local jails, they struggle with substance abuse, lack of adequate education and job skills, and mental health issues. The Second Chance Act will provide grants to local governments and organizations to help provide literacy classes, job training, education programs, and substance abuse and rehabilitation programs for offenders. The bill takes another step toward the goal of reducing the nationwide recidivism rate, which, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics is over 50 percent, and decreasing the billions of dollars spent annually on incarceration: Provides grants to states and local governments that may be used to promote the safe and successful reintegration into the community of individuals who have been incarcerated. Allowable uses of funds include employment services, substance abuse treatment, housing, family programming, mentoring, victims services, and methods to improve release and revocation decisions using risk-assessment tools:

[Congressional Staff Briefing on the Second Chance Act Supporting Effective Prisoner Reentry: Highlights:](#) On April 24, 2013, the Council of State Governments Justice Center (CSG Justice Center) and the National Association of Counties sponsored a congressional staff briefing with Senator Rob

Portman (R-OH) and Representative Danny Davis (D-IL) on the Second Chance Act. Reentry experts shared the accomplishments of programs funded by the Second Chance Act and highlighted the ongoing need for support of effective, evidence-based reentry initiatives. Congressman Danny Davis noted the bipartisan support surrounding the Second Chance Act and how it has advanced the field nationwide.

The grants will be used for the following services:

Mentoring Grants. Provides grants to nonprofit organizations that may be used for mentoring adult offenders or offering transitional services for reintegration into the community.

Offender Reentry Substance Abuse Treatment. Creates grants to improve the availability of drug treatment to offenders.

Family Drug Treatment Programs. Authorizes grants to states, local governments, and Indian tribes to develop and implement family-based treatment programs for incarcerated parents who have minor children.

Federal Reentry Initiative. Provides guidance to the Bureau of Prisons for enhanced reentry planning procedures. Also allows each inmate being released to receive specific information on health, employment, personal finance, release requirements and community resources.²³

Homeless Bill of Rights:

Another good news on a policy related to the homeless: A Bill of Rights for the Homeless:

Several states are considering guaranteeing civil rights for those without a roof over their heads. After several years of unsuccessful attempts by advocacy organizations to define civil rights for the homeless at the federal level, **Rhode Island** [became the first state to pass a Homeless Bill of Rights](#) in June 2012 in the form of an amendment to its constitution that protects its residents against discrimination based on housing status. Now in Rhode Island, “no person’s rights, privileges, or access to public services may be denied or abridged solely because he or she is homeless.” And the law specifies where and when the homeless must be treated as any other Rhode Islander: in public parks, on public transportation, when seeking emergency medical care, when seeking employment, when registering to vote and when maintaining private records. What’s more, the personal property of the homeless must be treated “as personal property in a permanent residence.”

This past June, nearly identical **Illinois and Connecticut** bills passed through their state assemblies without much opposition. (The Illinois and Connecticut bills are not yet law, currently awaiting their governors’ signatures.) Homeless bills of rights introduced in Missouri, Oregon and Vermont are similar, though all three are pending in committee until the next legislative session.

Advocates claim that the bills provide a moral and legal foundation to challenge local anti-vagrancy policies. When the social safety net started to breach in the 1970s, and then all but gave way during the Reagan years, homelessness increased noticeably in the centers of American cities. Cuts in federal assistance to the poor—including mental healthcare and affordable housing—put people out on the streets. As sociologist Teresa Gowan argues in her 2010 book *Hobos, Hustlers and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco*, rather than approach this crisis as a failure of society to take care of those in need, policymakers initiated “a crusade to save the homeless from themselves,” institutionalizing those who are willing to submit to treatment for drug addiction or mental illness, and criminalizing the rest under the “quality of life” laws that swept the country in the 1990s.

²³ Resource from: Office of Justice Programs: Bureau of Justice Assistance/ US Dept. of Justice www.bja.gov/Program

The past five years have seen another rise in homelessness. According to government statistics, the number of homeless families relying on shelters [increased 30 percent between 2007 and 2009](#), a spike that the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP) attributes to the foreclosure crisis and widespread unemployment. At the same time, the NLCHP also found in a survey of 224 cities that between 2006 and 2009 there was a [7 percent increase](#) in laws prohibiting “camping” on public property and an 11 percent increase in laws prohibiting loitering.

Sometimes the consequences are more serious than arrest. In March, Chicago public radio station WBEZ [interviewed Jack King](#), whose blankets and other possessions were confiscated by police when he was forced out from his camp under a viaduct in the Uptown neighborhood. Six cold days after WBEZ interviewed King, he was found dead outside of an area health clinic. The cause of death was hypertension and heart disease, and many critics of city policy have pointed a finger at police for disrupting his camp and snatching his provisions.

Though the Illinois Homeless Bill of Rights might have prevented the police from taking his property without justification, it wouldn't have given King the right to camp under the bridge.

A bill currently under consideration **in California**, however, would have let King sleep. The bill was [introduced in December 2012](#) by Assemblyman Tom Ammiano (D-San Francisco), known for his work as a gay rights activist, and it has caught the attention of advocates across the country. The California bill—dubbed AB 5—would give the homeless “the right to engage in life sustaining activities” on public property, including sleeping, panhandling and salvaging recyclables. If passed, the bill will effectively prune back municipal anti-vagrancy laws like San Francisco’s “Civil Sidewalks” ordinance, passed by referendum in 2010, that forbids sitting or sleeping on sidewalks in the daytime. The bill also includes an estimated \$300 million budget that would establish hygiene centers and provide legal aid to challenge non-traffic citations, the category under which many vagrancy offenses fall.

In April, AB 5 passed the judiciary committee by a 7-2 vote. However, the bill didn't make it out of the Appropriations Committee before the session's end, and it will be held up until January 2014 due to concerns about the cost of enforcing the new bill.

The proposed legislation faces a large and organized opposition, including the business interests of California's large cities. A *Los Angeles Times* editorial criticized the bill for sanctioning “a way of life that society generally agrees should be ended” and claimed that it would “turn the homeless into a protected class.” This criticism, however, doesn't hold water for the bill's advocates. Both Boden and Ammiano like to recite Anatole France's wry observation that “the law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.”

In Gowan's opinion, whatever the outcome, homeless bills of rights from California to Rhode Island represent a shift in the conversation away from the notion that homelessness is a “side effect” of an individual pathology— and a return to the idea that society has a responsibility to provide full employment, affordable housing and mental healthcare.

I think we are slowly heading the right direction. This is why public policy advocacy is so important. We all, including churches and faith-based communities as well as homeless themselves must be involved. Government officials are after all same human beings as ourselves and homeless people as well. They too have compassionate hearts. All they need is to hear from citizens as often as possible so that they will know what we are most concerned about and what and how we want them to represent us.