

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

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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.

—Isaiah 1:17 (NLT)

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). Both our individual actions and our 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 stood with and 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 neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39), which calls us to extend our compassion to neighbors 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).

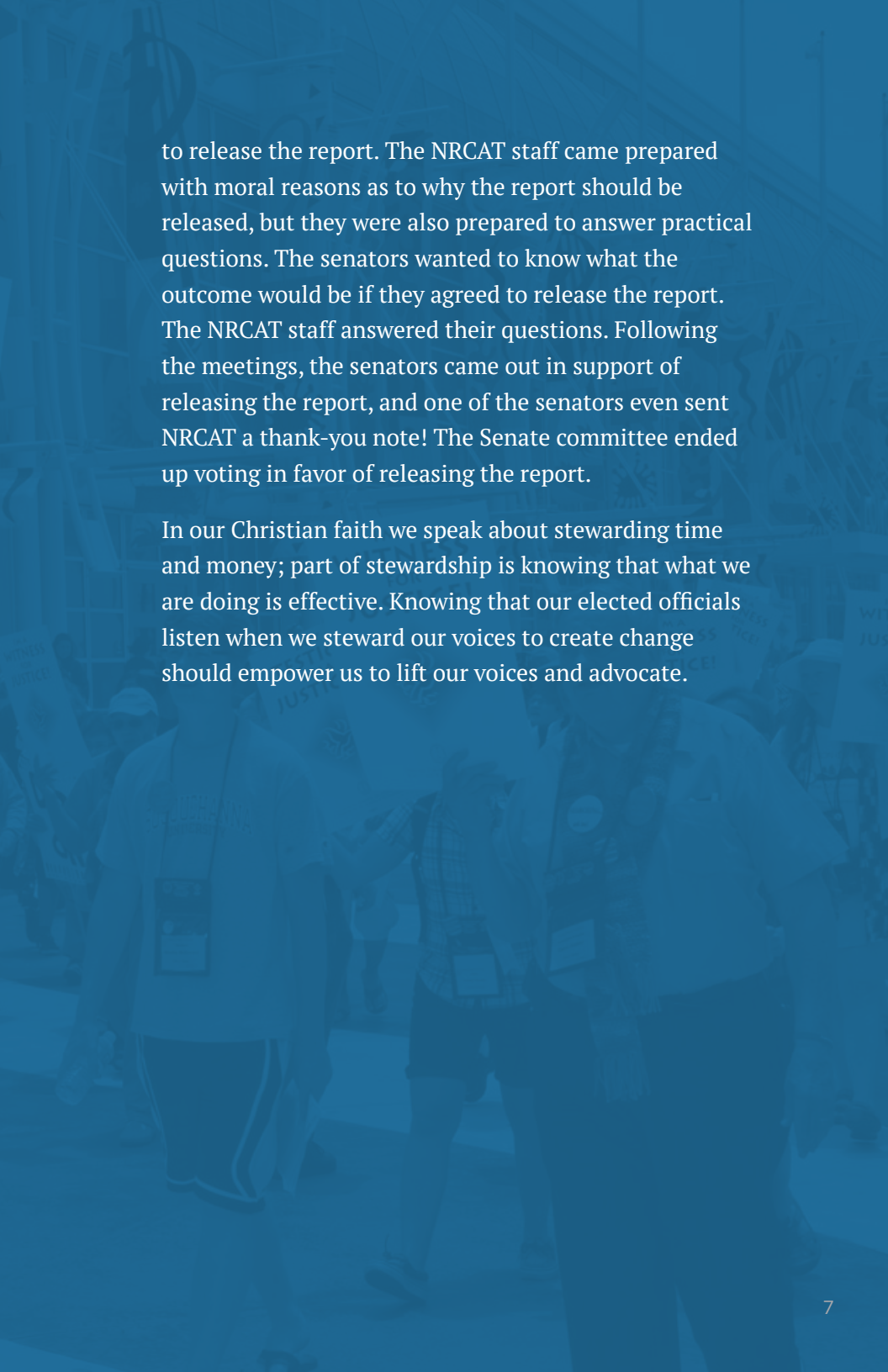
It can also be common for social justice advocates to appeal to Proverbs 31:8-9—the *voice for the voiceless* passage. An Indigenous leader once confronted church leaders who wanted to take part in Indigenous justice work. Using an appeal to this passage, he said to them, *With respect, I'm not voiceless; 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 Congress will welcome perspectives and input from you. Without feedback from constituents and from organizations that work directly with vulnerable groups, elected officials may not modify their views or take action on a specific issue.

Research by the Congressional Management Foundation in the U.S. shows that advocacy makes a difference. When Capitol Hill staff were recently surveyed, they stated that if their member of Congress had not yet reached a firm position on an issue, a meeting, individualized letters, emails, and calls would influence the member's position. It often takes as few as seven letters for a congressional office to begin tracking, or paying specific attention to, constituent's positions on an issue. Letters, emails, and calls are logged so that constituent opinion can be gauged and members are made aware of which issues are most important to their community.

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) cites advocacy as an important influence on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence decision to release the Report on Torture in 2014. NRCAT staff organized meetings with senators on the Senate Intelligence Committee in which they asked the senators



to release the report. The NRCAT staff came prepared with moral reasons as to why the report should be released, but they were also prepared to answer practical questions. The senators wanted to know what the outcome would be if they agreed to release the report. The NRCAT staff answered their questions. Following the meetings, the senators came out in support of releasing the report, and one of the senators even sent NRCAT a thank-you note! The Senate committee ended up voting in favor of releasing the report.

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 steward our voices to create change should empower us to lift our voices and advocate.

How to Advocate

Meet

An in-person meeting with your member of Congress or your member's staff is the most effective way to advocate and have an impact as a constituent. To find your House representative, visit [house.gov](https://www.house.gov). To find your senator, visit [senate.gov](https://www.senate.gov).

Most U.S. members of Congress have an online form on their website through which you can request a meeting. If they do not have an online form, you can call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and ask to be transferred to your member's office. Once you are transferred, you can ask to speak to the scheduler or ask for the scheduler's email. The office aide who answers the phone should know the preferred method to contact the scheduler—either by phone or email.

You can then request a meeting with either the member of Congress or a staff person. The scheduler will help you with 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.

It is always important to follow up your online or email meeting request with a phone call to the office assistant or scheduler to politely remind the staff of your meeting request.

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 on [congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov) to see which legislation they have supported. You can also search for your member's voting record on govtrack.us/congress/votes.

After an in-person meeting, you should give your member or staff person "a leave-behind." This will ensure that the office has a record of your meeting, a way to follow up with you, and a clear request. The leave-behind is simply a paper that

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

When meeting with your legislator, it is most effective to engage in dialogue and have a conversation rather than talking at or demanding from your representative.

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 needs to be firm and what can be flexible.

These meetings also provide an opportunity for you to give back to your representative by offering constituent feedback and further knowledge on your chosen topic. You will be most effective if you can relate your request back to your constituency and local context.

It is very important 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 members of Congress. You should make a clear request in only one or two paragraphs; your letter does not need to be lengthy to be powerful.

You can email your member of Congress online through their website. Most members of Congress have a “Contact” page through which you can submit an email. Email is the fastest way to contact your legislator, other than by calling. This is recommended if the subject of your message is time sensitive.

You can also mail a handwritten letter to your member of Congress. Their address can be found online through



their website, usually also under the “Contact” page. All mail received at the U.S. Congress must go through extensive screening, so you should be prepared to wait more than a month for a reply.

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

Attend

Many representatives hold town hall meetings while they are at home in their district. These are important to attend in order to create a relationship with your legislator 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 representative a question in public. 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 legislator 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.

We recommend that you prepare a few questions ahead of time and think carefully about how you are framing your request or message. If your question requires background information, it can also be helpful to call or email your representative ahead of time with information regarding your question—this is another way to build a relationship.

Call

An effective and fast way to contact your member of Congress is by calling their office. You can call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and ask to be transferred to your member of Congress.

Once you are transferred, you will likely speak to an office assistant in your legislator's office. You can tell this person that you are a constituent and that you would like to leave a message for your representative. Then clearly state the message you would like your representative 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 legislative aide 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 legislative aide who works on immigration?” If you are not able to speak with an aide, you can still leave your message with the office assistant. Either method is a sure way to get your message to your representative.

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

Post

Social media is another great way to steward 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 members on issues you are passionate about. To find your legislator’s social media information, visit [house.gov/representatives](https://www.house.gov/representatives) or [senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm](https://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm). There are several ways to communicate with your members of Congress:

- **Facebook:** Find your legislators’ Facebook pages 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 legislators 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 members of Congress. 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 or visit the following organizations:

- the Office of Social Justice, crcna.org/justice
- World Renew, worldrenew.net
- Bread for the World, bread.org
- the Alliance to End Hunger, alliancetoendhunger.org,
Advocacy Playbook — [alliancetoendhunger.org/
advocacy-playbook/](http://alliancetoendhunger.org/advocacy-playbook/)

Listen and Build

You don't have to advocate alone. As you partner with agencies and connect with your representative, 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 ZIP 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 Congress “a leave-behind” letter 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.

