

The Role of Religion in Public Life: A Primer



Pennsylvania Council of Churches
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Appendix A

The Purpose of This Primer

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches has long believed in our call as Christians to be faithful citizens, participating in the public square in ways that support God's call to love our neighbors as ourselves (without defining neighbor as only those in our affinity group) and to treat others as we wish to be treated (known as "The Golden Rule"). This call is described in significantly greater detail in the Introduction.

We've also observed that there appears to be much confusion concerning history, our government systems, and what we can do as faithful citizens and as congregations. We forget that many of our forebears came to this continent to escape religious persecution. In remembering this, we are reminded that many of our neighbors face persecution and injustices as well—and that we have a responsibility to ensure that they are not forced to endure that which we would not want inflicted upon us. We forget (or perhaps never understood) that "the wall of separation between church and state" was meant to protect us from religious tyranny exercised by the state—that is, the imposition of state-sponsored religion that drove many of our forebears out of their homes. This so-called "wall" is not a barrier to exercise our rights as faithful citizens, guided by our faith. However, it also needs to be noted that this does not mean that we have the right to impose our specific beliefs and practices on those who believe and practice differently.

Finally, it seems that our educational systems are not providing comprehensive instruction on how our government works—at least not in the same way some of us may remember. Time spent in educational forums in congregations has revealed that many are confused by the different levels of government, separation of powers, and how laws are constructed and passed. When they recognize a problem to be addressed, or legislation they would like to see passed, they often don't know where to go to make their voices heard—or even when they do, they feel intimidated or powerless. Knowledge of these systems and how to work within them is essential if we are to engage in ways that are constructive and successful.

We hope that this guide will help you to discuss faithful citizenship within your own congregations, regardless of whether your congregation leans to one end of the political spectrum or the other, or is a true mix of folks from across the spectrum. We offer it to you at a time when we believe it is needed more than ever, and we invite your questions and feedback.

Yours in faithful citizenship,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Sandra L. Strauss".

The Rev. Sandra L. Strauss
Director of Advocacy and Ecumenical Outreach

On behalf of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches' Commission on Public Witness

May 2019

Introduction

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches, through its Public Witness Ministry, seeks to:

- **empower** people of faith, through education and skill-building, to make a difference for the common good in the public square;
- **advocate** on behalf of the Council's member church bodies before Pennsylvania's legislative and administrative branches of government.

There is good reason for the faith community to be engaged in this work.

Why We Do Advocacy

When Jesus was asked to state the greatest commandment, he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart ... And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." In this complex age, one way we love our neighbors is to help shape the laws and policies that define how we live together in God's world.

—From the Home Page of the PC(USA) Washington Office (www.pcusa.org/washington).

God calls us to be full participants in civil society. This is not new to 21st Century society—we find its roots in ancient Israel.

There are numerous calls for justice throughout scripture, particularly with respect to “widows and orphans”—the most vulnerable in ancient societies. The prophets of Israel cry out for justice for vulnerable persons. Isaiah's words, in 1:17, are representative: “...seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” In his New Testament letter, James said, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead” (James 2:15-17).

Proverbs 31:8-9 provides an early call to advocacy: “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.” Early Reformers took this to heart. Martin Luther “wrote over one thousand letters to civil authorities, including letters regarding their public policies; fervently admonished preachers to preach against economic injustice and against economic practices and public policies that thwarted the well-being of the poor...and insisted that if civil authorities call Christians to actions that disobey God, then Christians must resist” (Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, in *Public Church: For the Life of the World*, p. 42).

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches has taken this call to heart as well. Through the public advocacy ministry, the Council strives to: (1) empower people of faith, through education and skill-building, to make a difference for the common good in the public square; and (2) advocate on behalf of the Council's member church bodies before Pennsylvania's legislative and administrative branches of government.

When we advocate for justice, we translate the church's deep convictions about justice, peace and freedom from words into reality. Through our advocacy efforts, we can discover a whole new way to share God's love in the world!



A Changing Landscape

The roots of the concept of public advocacy lie in support for the Prohibition movement. As the Council developed its own structure, by the mid-1920s its Commission on Social Service became “a heterogeneous forum of representatives from denominational and secular agencies, cooperating with most of the reform and humanitarian groups in the state....” Later advocacy work was assigned to various groups within the Council such as the Department of Social Relations, the Division of Social Ministry, and currently the Commission on Public Witness. The appointment of the Rev. George I. Evans in 1958 as the Division of Social Ministry’s first full-time Executive Secretary established the Director of Public Advocacy staff position that has remained a permanent part of the Council’s structure.

In 1961 the newly formed Division of Social Relations began “to formulate a series of legislative statements which would represent the legislative viewpoint of the churches. It was thought that these ‘Legislative Concerns’ could be printed and circulated among the legislators and the churches.” By 1976 the Council had developed a lengthy Statement of Legislative Principles. Within each broad category were sub-paragraphs listing initiatives that the Council either supported or opposed. Included with the Statement was a schedule for updating the Principles within the following two years.

This structure marked the approach to public advocacy until 2003, when for the first time both the principles and policy positions were organized around the Biblical concepts of justice and shalom, and the document also contained printed reference to the denominational positions of the member bodies of the Council. Because the Principles were based on Biblical concepts supported by member denominational positions, substantial updates every legislative session were not needed. Legislative priorities, specified separately, continued to be updated biennially as conditions changed at the local, state, federal, and global levels.

In 2012 the Principles returned to being organized around issues, with priorities continuing to be updated biennially. Principles are illustrated via scriptural passages and relevant citations, highlighted in boxes throughout the document. For each issue, it (1) states what we believe, (2) gives an overview of what exists now and the challenges, (3) uses the principles to lay out a vision for how things would be if we truly follow a path of loving God and loving neighbor, and (4) provides real world examples of the kind of advocacy efforts the Council has undertaken in working toward its vision. It still cites supporting policies and statements from member bodies.

Finally, in recent years the role of the advocacy program has evolved overall. Previously, Council staff spent a substantial amount of time lobbying legislators. This still happens, but the role has shifted significantly to education and to providing resources for people of faith to engage in direct advocacy for several reasons: (1) the environment has become considerably more partisan and controlled by party leadership; (2) the role of money has diminished the impact of a single voice from the Council, so voices of constituents have become appreciably more important; (3) new ways of communicating electronically have made the sharing of information and resources faster and easier; and (4) these same changes have made it faster and easier for more constituents to make their voices heard.

Given our call to faithful witness and advocacy in this radically different time, the Council believes that this resource will provide context and important information to support this vital work of the church for such a time as this.

History

William Penn, father of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, was a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) who experienced persecution for his beliefs in his native England. He was jailed several times for his public witness that did not conform to the Church of England (the Anglican Church). Penn was an ardent supporter of religious freedom, campaigning for it in the court of King Charles II.

Penn saw the possibility of a society based on religious tolerance in the New World. According to a brief biography:

Seeing no prospects for religious tolerance or political reform in England, Penn looked to America, which he had visited briefly in 1677. In a 1682 document, Penn guaranteed absolute freedom of worship in Pennsylvania. Rich in fertile lands as well as religious freedom, the colony attracted settlers and grew rapidly.¹

Thus, William Penn founded the then colony of Pennsylvania (“Penn’s Woods”) on the basis of religious freedom. It appears that Penn, in the 1682 document, *Pennsylvania Charter of Liberty, Laws Agreed Upon in England*, may have been the first to explicitly express disestablishment (that is, maintaining church and state as separate entities):

That all persons living in this province, who confess and acknowledge the one Almighty and eternal God, to be the Creator, Upholder and Ruler of the world; and that hold themselves obliged in conscience to live peaceably and justly in civil society, shall, in no ways, be molested or prejudiced for their religious persuasion, or practice, in matters of faith and worship, nor shall they be compelled, at any time, to frequent or maintain any religious worship, place or ministry whatever.²

But Penn was not alone. In his actions, Penn joined Roger Williams, a Puritan and founder of the colony of Rhode Island:

Williams’ Nonconformist leanings lured him across the Atlantic to Plymouth in 1631 ... His views on religion and government quickly embroiled him in disputes with the Massachusetts authorities in Salem and Boston...In 1635, he was expelled from the church and placed under an order of expulsion from the colony In 1636, he and a number of followers established the settlement of Providence on Narragansett Bay ... Williams founded the first Baptist Church in America, but soon withdrew and thereafter referred to himself as a “seeker,” meaning basically a nondenominational Christian in search of spiritual truth.

One of Williams’ beliefs had caused particular grief among the authorities. He argued that an individual Christian would know when he was saved, but could not know about the salvation of others. Therefore, it was senseless to require a religious qualification for voting. In essence, Williams was calling for the complete separation of church and state, a position that undercut the authority of the church and civic leaders.

Williams obtained a royal charter for Rhode Island in 1644 Under Williams’ influence, Rhode Island became a haven for those who suffered from religious persecution, including Jews and Quakers.³

The efforts of people like Penn and Williams during the earliest stages of our country’s formation appear contrary to claims that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. In fact, the constitutional principle of religious liberty is embodied in these words in the First Amendment to our Constitution: “Congress shall make no law



¹ http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/colonial/jb_colonial_penn_3.html.

² The Founder’s Constitution, Amendment 1, Art. 35, http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendI_religions9.html.

³ www.u-s-history.com/pages/h584.html.

respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” Simply stated, this “Establishment Clause” is meant to prevent government from promoting religion or interfering with its practice.

While the words “separation of church and state” do not appear in the Constitution, there is little question that the framers of this document believed that such separation is implied in the words of the Establishment Clause:



Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802 to answer a letter from them written in October 1801 The Danbury Baptists were a religious minority in Connecticut, and they complained that in their state, the religious liberties they enjoyed were not seen as immutable rights, but as privileges granted by the legislature—as “favors granted.” Jefferson’s reply did not address their concerns about problems with state establishment of religion—only that on the national level. The letter contains the phrase “wall of separation between church and state,” which led to the short-hand for the Establishment Clause that we use today: “Separation of church and state.”⁴

First Amendment Center senior scholar Charles Haynes writes, “The philosophical ideas and religious convictions of Roger Williams, William Penn, John Leland, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and other leaders were decisive in the struggle for freedom of conscience.” He further notes:

The guiding principles that the framers intended to govern the relationship between religion and politics are set forth in Article VI of the Constitution and in the opening 16 words of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights. Now that America has expanded from the largely Protestant pluralism of the 17th century to a nation of some 3,000 religious groups, it is more vital than ever that every citizen understand the appropriate role of religion in public life and affirm the constitutional guarantees of religious liberty, or freedom of conscience, for people of all faiths and none.⁵

Haynes provides a “Frame of Reference”⁶ for today based on and affirming the ideals and convictions that these leaders embraced.

In the more recent past, both “liberals” and “conservatives” have continued to embrace the principle of separation of church and state. Critics of Roman Catholic presidential hopeful John F. Kennedy feared that as president, he would take orders from the Vatican. Kennedy sought to ease these fears, expressing his support for religious liberty in a 1960 speech:

I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant or Jewish—where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source, where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.⁷

Likewise, the late conservative Republican Barry Goldwater, who ran for president in 1964, is on the record in support of separation of church and state with these words from a 1994 essay written for the *Washington Post*:

⁴ The U.S. Constitution Online, “Jefferson’s Wall of Separation Letter,” www.usconstitution.net/jeffwall.html.

⁵ Charles Haynes, “History of Religious Liberty in America” (written for Civitas: A Framework for Civic Education. Copyright 1991, Council for the Advancement of Citizenship and the Center for Civic Education), reprinted by permission at <http://www.newseuminstitute.org/first-amendment-center/topics/freedom-of-religion/religious-liberty-in-america-overview/history-of-religious-liberty-in-america/>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ John F. Kennedy, Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, September 12, 1960, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600>.

I am a conservative Republican, but I believe in democracy and the separation of church and state. The conservative movement is founded on the simple tenet that people have the right to live life as they please as long as they don't hurt anyone else in the process.⁸

Goldwater appears to have held these views for a long time, as evidenced by these words from a 1981 speech to the U.S. Senate:

By maintaining the separation of church and state, the United States has avoided the intolerance which has so divided the rest of the world with religious wars Can any of us refute the wisdom of Madison and the other framers? Can anyone look at the carnage in Iran, the bloodshed in Northern Ireland or the bombs bursting in Lebanon and yet question the dangers of injecting religious issues into the affairs of state?⁹

In her book, *A New Religious America*, religious scholar Dr. Diana L. Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University and Director of the Pluralism Project, says, "The United States is the most religiously diverse nation in the world."¹⁰ She suggests that many people are unaware of the radical change in religious landscape that came with the Immigration Act of 1965, which eliminated the quotas linking immigration to national origins and thus brought "Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians, and new varieties of Jews and Catholics ... from every part of the globe." Among the startling facts and statistics:

- The 1990s saw the U.S. Navy commission its first Muslim chaplain and open its first mosque.
- There are presently more than three hundred temples in Los Angeles, home to the greatest variety of Buddhists in the world.
- There are more American Muslims than there are American Episcopalians, Jews, or Presbyterians.¹¹

⁸ Found in numerous locations, including <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/587176>.

⁹ Found in numerous locations, including <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/16/us/excerpts-from-goldwater-remarks.html>.

¹⁰ The Pluralism Project, <http://pluralism.org/about/who-we-are/diana-eck/publications-and-media/a-new-religious-america/>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Theological Perspective

In recent years there has been a growing concern over government actions and proposals that threaten the separation of church and state. Many are familiar with the ongoing legal battles over the display of religious materials on government property and in other public places, and over passage of legislation that enshrines discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs.

Scripture does not speak specifically to the issue of separation of church and state, though Matthew does suggest that Jesus draws a distinction between one's allegiance to God and to government in these words: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."¹² We do know, however, the fate of many early Christians who continued to practice their faith under the reign of a hostile Roman government. Here are some words from Pliny the Younger:

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persevered I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished.¹³

We also know the fate suffered by some early settlers in our own country for practicing their faith:

Puritan Congregationalism had been established in New England with freedom of worship for Congregationalists but dissenters did not enjoy the same freedom because Congregationalism resorted to fines, whips, jails, and gallows to enforce its religious monopoly.¹⁴

Even today we have witnessed the violence and death that can result when radical religious traditions become enmeshed with governments around the world. Given the growing diversity of religious traditions in the United States, it is important to maintain the "wall of separation" that was intended by our nation's founders, so that a majority in one faith tradition cannot threaten or interfere with the ability of others to practice freely within their own traditions, and no one feels threatened because of government policies concerning their religious practices.

In 2002, The American Jewish Committee, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, The Interfaith Alliance Foundation, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism issued a joint publication entitled "**A Shared Vision: Religious Liberty in the 21st Century.**" The document asserts that the separation of church and state remains the "best means of assuring robust religious liberty and to creating a climate of mutual respect in a religiously diverse culture."¹⁵ Their vision:



As organizations committed to religious liberty as well as a dynamic role for religion in public life, we share a different vision about the future: a vision that avoids both the theocratic tendencies on one side and the hostility about religion associated with the other. Now more than ever, the United States must maintain its commitment to freedom for persons of all faiths and persons of no faith. We are beset by religious and ethnic conflict abroad. Exploding pluralism challenges us at home. At such a time, we must reaffirm our dedication to providing what

¹² From Matthew 20:17-21 (NRSV).

¹³ Pliny the Younger (governor of Pontus/Bithynia from A.D. 111-113), in a letter to the Emperor Trajan (written A.D. 111 or 112), www.bible-researcher.com/persecution.html.

¹⁴ Carl L. Becker, "Religious Freedom: The Other Revolution," <https://www.varsitytutors.com/earlyamerica/early-america-review/volume-7/religious-freedom-history-revolution>.

¹⁵ Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, <http://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/A-Shared-Vision.pdf>.

Roger Williams called a “haven for the cause of conscience.” We agree with Williams that conscience is best guarded by maintaining a healthy distance between the institutions of religion and government.

But it is not enough to reaffirm these truths. This statement is a call to action. We must apply these principles in practical ways whether we are electing a school board member or an American president, whether we are debating aid to parochial schools or prayer in public schools.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

A Christian Perspective on Civic Engagement

Christian faith and scripture both speak to government. Scripture is teeming with stories of people of faith accepting the challenge of God's call to speak truth to power and step into the political world. Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other Hebrew prophets confronted the power structures of their day to demand change in how the people were ruled. In the early church, Paul lectured on the duties of citizenship. Church reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin took these scriptural imperatives to heart; in fact, according to Cynthia Moe-Lobeda in *Public Church: For the Life of the World* (p. 42), Luther



...wrote over one thousand letters to civil authorities, including letters regarding their public policies; fervently admonished preachers to preach against economic injustice and against economic practices and public policies that thwarted the well-being of the poor ... and insisted that if civil authorities call Christians to actions that disobey God, then Christians must resist.

Jesus' life and, indeed, his death exemplified the cost of speaking truth to power.

Perhaps the most influential work on the role of Christians in contemporary culture is H. Richard Niebuhr's book *Christ in Culture*, which proposes five models, including: 1) Christ against culture; 2) Christ of culture; 3) Christ above culture; 4) Christ and culture in paradox; and 5) Christ the transformer of culture. Here are brief descriptions of each, quoted/adapted from an online overview of Niebuhr's work:¹⁷

- 1) Christ against culture: Loyalty to Christ and the church entails a rejection of culture and society. Niebuhr rejects it as inadequate for its inability to extricate itself from the culture it condemns.
- 2) Christ of culture: Here there is a lack of tension between the church and the world, since Jesus is the fulfiller of society's hopes and aspirations. Niebuhr sees it as inadequate for allowing loyalty to culture trump loyalty to Christ.
- 3) Christ above culture: According to Niebuhr, this is the dominant voice of church history. The fundamental issue is between God and humanity, not God and the world.
- 4) Christ and culture in paradox: This is the dualistic version of "Christ above Culture": the conflict between God and humanity is ever present, and this conflict represents Christ and culture as well. Upholding the paradox of law and grace, divine wrath and mercy, the Christian lives between two magnetic poles. Though Niebuhr recognizes the power of this view because of the way it corresponds to our experience, he finds it inadequate for its tendency to reject moral law because faith alone is necessary for salvation.
- 5) Christ the transformer of culture: This is the conversionist version of "Christ above Culture." According to this view, all of culture is under the judgment of God, and yet culture is also under God's sovereign rule. Therefore, "the Christian must carry on cultural work in obedience to the Lord" (191). Emphasizing the goodness of creation, the conversionist affirms what can be affirmed and seeks to transform what is corrupted by sin and selfishness. Niebuhr writes that eternal life begins in the present.

Of course, Biblical figures lived in another time and in a vastly different political climate from the experience of contemporary Christians who co-exist with peoples of many faiths within a representative democracy where citizens have greater freedom and responsibility to bear witness. We are called by scripture to "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8-9).

¹⁷ "Christ and Culture" – An Overview of a Christian Classic, February 25, 2015, <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/trevinwax/2015/02/25/christ-and-culture-an-overview-of-a-christian-classic/>.

Over the years, one of the central questions of political philosophy is the purpose of government. Many great political philosophers, from Plato to John Rawls, have concerned themselves with this question. One common thought is that the purpose of the state is to protect rights and to preserve justice. This raises a couple of questions: Which rights and whose rights? What constitutes justice? There are varied conceptions as to the answers to these questions.

Elected officials are entrusted with managing the shared resources of the people and ensuring that decisions are made with justice and transparency. If government works as intended, its services, such as public safety and security, health, community and human services and public education, benefit the common good and address the needs of all citizens. Government has an especially significant role in protecting those who are weak and vulnerable—those who are unable to protect themselves.

From its inception, public advocacy efforts by the faith community have focused on root causes of many of the problems government is intended to address, including poverty and hunger. No less important are the root causes of citizen cynicism and disengagement from government, because these conditions often silence the voices of the persons our government is charged to serve and protect.



The Council has long been aware of the distortions of power and the inordinate role of money within governing structures at every level. Woodrow Wilson’s prayer for giving “wisdom to our counselors” has become an imperative for citizens whose leaders, elected to public service, have violated the public trust by elevating themselves, enhancing their personal power, and becoming more responsive to moneyed interests than to the voices of common persons, moving agendas that do not benefit the

common good nor assure protection of the vulnerable. In other words, there is significant evidence that the power of ordinary citizens remains secondary to that of special interests and, indeed, to those elected to serve us.

And while the fruits of Christian persistence in seeking justice can be found in numerous movements throughout the years, including the abolition of slavery, civil rights, human rights, the environment, and the death penalty/criminal justice, to name a few, the influence of money and the perception that individuals are powerless to change the system seems to discourage the kind of Christian activism most prevalent during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. However, moving forward in the 21st Century, as enormous political divisions have stymied progress toward a more just society and individual political differences have pitted neighbor against neighbor (and even family member against family member), there is a growing realization that Christians must hear anew the call to be faithful citizens in their communities, states, nation, and the world, as evidenced by the rising movement called “Repairers of the Breach,” which describes itself as follows:

...a nonpartisan and ecumenical organization that seeks to ... help frame public policies which are not constrained or confined by the narrow tenets of neo-conservatism. Repairers will bring together clergy and lay people from different faith traditions, with people without a spiritual practice but who share the moral principles at the heart of the great moral teachings. Repairers will expand a “school of prophets” who can broadly spread the vision of a nation that is just and loving.¹⁸

The name, of course, comes from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 58:12): “Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”

No doubt this story will continue to evolve.

¹⁸ <http://www.breachrepairers.org/>.

Civics 101

What is the form of government of the United States?

Typically the United States is labeled as a democracy, defined as follows:

Democracy ([Greek](#): δημοκρατία, *dēmokratía* literally "rule of the people"), in modern usage, is a system of government in which the citizens exercise power directly or elect representatives from among themselves to form a governing body, such as a [parliament](#).^[1] Democracy is sometimes referred to as "rule of the majority".^[2] Democracy is a system of processing conflicts in which outcomes depend on what participants do but no single force controls what occurs and its outcomes. The uncertainty of outcomes is inherent in democracy, which makes all forces struggle repeatedly for the realization of their interests, being the devolution of power from a group of people to a set of rules.^[3] Western democracy, as distinct from that which existed in pre-modern societies, is generally considered to have originated in city states such as [Classical Athens](#) and the [Roman Republic](#), where various schemes and degrees of enfranchisement of the free male population were observed before the form disappeared in the West at the beginning of [late antiquity](#). The English word dates to the 16th century, from the older [Middle French](#) and [Middle Latin](#) equivalents.



According to political scientist [Larry Diamond](#), democracy consists of four key elements: (a) A political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair [elections](#); (b) The active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life; (c) Protection of the [human rights](#) of all citizens, and (d) A [rule of law](#), in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens.^[4]¹⁹

Others would say that the United States is more of a federal republic:

A **federal republic** is a [federation](#) of [states](#) with a [republican](#) form of government.^[1] At its core, the literal meaning of the word republic when used to reference a form of government means: "a country that is governed by elected representatives and by an elected leader (such as a president) rather than by a king or queen".

In a federal republic, there is a [division of powers](#) between the federal government, and the government of the individual subdivisions. While each federal republic manages this division of powers differently, common matters relating to security and defense, and monetary policy are usually handled at the federal level, while matters such as infrastructure maintenance and education policy are usually handled at the regional or local level.²⁰

Dr. Eugene Volokh, Gary T. Schwartz Distinguished Professor of Law at UCLA, calls this distinction a "false dichotomy." He says, "we are a representative democracy, which is a form of democracy." But, he adds:

To be sure, in addition to being a representative democracy, the United States is also a constitutional democracy, in which courts restrain in some measure the democratic will. And the United States is therefore also a constitutional republic. Indeed, the United States might be labeled a constitutional federal representative democracy. But where one word is used, with all the oversimplification that this necessarily entails, "democracy" and "republic" both work. Indeed, since direct democracy — again, a government in which all or most laws are made by direct popular vote — would be impractical given the number and complexity of laws that pretty much any state or national

¹⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy>

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_republic

government is expected to enact, it's unsurprising that the qualifier "representative" would often be omitted. Practically speaking, representative democracy is the only democracy that's around at any state or national level.²¹

In other words, labeling the form of government of the United States is not so simple.

What are the levels of government?

There are four basic levels of government in the United States: 1) local/municipal; 2) county; 3) state; and 4) federal. Each level has certain responsibilities. Let's take a look at the functions at each level.

Municipal Government

Municipal governments are "established to provide general government for a defined area."²² Pennsylvania has cities, townships, boroughs, and a couple of "town" designations. Pennsylvania contains no unincorporated areas not served by the government of one of these entities. In general:



Municipalities generally take responsibility for parks and recreation services, police and fire departments, housing services, emergency medical services, municipal courts, transportation services (including public transportation), and public works (streets, sewers, snow removal, signage, and so forth).²³

Actual responsibilities vary by municipality. Municipalities also have some taxing authority to help in paying for the government/services provided—typically income-based taxes and property taxes, though some are also able to

collect sales taxes (added to the existing state-level sales tax). Local/municipal governments often advocate at the state and federal levels for programs and funding that support their work.

Local governments are granted powers by the state.

County Government

A brief description of county governments:

County governments are organized local governments authorized in state constitutions and statutes. Counties and [county-equivalents](#) form the first-tier administrative division of the states.

All the states are divided into counties or county-equivalents for administrative purposes, although not all counties or county-equivalents have an organized county government.²⁴

An interesting history of how county governments evolved may be found at Encyclopedia.com's description on county governments. According to this same site:

For most of U.S. history the core function of county government was to fulfill the administrative mandates of their respective states. This included "housekeeping" functions such as assessing and collecting property taxes, registering voters and administering elections, providing law enforcement, prosecuting criminals, administering a jail, recording deeds and other legal records, maintaining roads, keeping vital statistics, and controlling communicable diseases.

²¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/05/13/is-the-united-states-of-america-a-republic-or-a-democracy>

²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_government_in_the_United_States#Municipal_governments

²³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/state-and-local-government>

²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_government_in_the_United_States#Municipal_governments

Urbanization (and suburbanization) brought to highly populated counties additional government functions such as the administration of mass transportation, airports, water supply and sewage disposal, hospitals, building and housing codes, public housing, stadiums, recreation and cultural programs, libraries, and consumer protection. Counties have also played a major administrative role in welfare programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Medicaid, and in state mandated environmental programs. The number of functional roles that a county government assumes is highly dependent on the population of the county. While nearly all counties assume the traditional "housekeeping" roles identified earlier, only the counties with populations over one million tend to assume all of the roles identified above.

The growing functional role of county governments has not been met with increased autonomy or legislative power. The functions that county governments assume are highly determined by what the states mandate. County governments rarely legislate general ordinances in the way that city councils do. Instead, the county government's legislative power is usually limited to zoning issues and building regulations.²⁵

The authority of county governments varies considerably from state to state. In Pennsylvania, counties are weaker than municipal governments, and weaker than counties in many other states. However, county government can levy taxes, such as property tax, on citizens to pay for the government/services provided.

Like local/municipal governments, counties often advocate at the state and federal levels for programs and funding that support their work.

State Government

Here is a very brief description of the duties of state government:

States shoulder the duties to administer roads, education, public safety, justice and more, as decided by voters, state lawmakers, and the state constitution. States take on all the powers not specifically granted to the U.S. Federal government, according to the 10th Amendment to the United States Constitution.²⁶



Other major functions include:

- Collecting revenue and administering a budget to manage these activities. States are typically required to have a balanced budget—unlike the federal government.
- Administering federal programs and the funds associated with them. A couple of examples: (1) SNAP, Medicaid, housing, and other programs aimed at our most vulnerable neighbors; and (2) Community Development Block Grants, which provide flexible funding for specific needs identified within states.

Pennsylvania does engage in all the activities noted above, though exactly how it functions often depends on the leadership in the General Assembly and in the Governor's Office. In more recent years, Pennsylvania's General Assembly and some governors have often engaged in fighting federal mandates, particularly around environmental regulations, and have resisted raising revenues to support the ever-growing costs of some of the other responsibilities, including transportation, education, and the environment. In addition, the General Assembly has sometimes engaged in trying to limit the autonomy of county and local governments when it has disagreed with specific actions taken. This body has also resisted implementing a fair and adequate formula for funding public education, which results in wide disparities among Pennsylvania's school districts, often along racial lines—and the share that the state

²⁵ <http://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/us-government/county-government>

²⁶ What are the Duties of State Government? <http://peopleof.oureverydaylife.com/duties-state-government-9674.html>

contributes to public education has been declining for many years, putting Pennsylvania near the bottom in what it provides to support public schools when compared to other states.

One major difference from other states is that Pennsylvania has no mechanism for initiatives or referendums that come from among Pennsylvania citizens. Any measures put before voters must be referred to the ballot by the General Assembly.

It should also be noted that:

The General Assembly has 253 members, consisting of a Senate with 50 members and a House of Representatives with 203 members, making it the second-largest state legislature in the nation (behind New Hampshire) and the largest full-time legislature.²⁷

Federal Government

The United States Constitution outlines the responsibilities of the federal government, which includes:



- Law-Making—creating and enforcing laws to ensure order and stability within society.
- National Economy—controlling the nation's economy. Congress has the authority to levy taxes, duties and excises to raise money in order to pay the country's debts. It can also borrow money and regulate both international and interstate commerce. Most importantly, Congress has the power to print or coin money, and to regulate its value.
- National Security—protecting its citizens. The Constitution places national defense in the hands of the federal government. It divides war powers between the president and Congress (though in recent years Congress has partially abdicated its responsibility).
- Foreign Policy—representing the nation's interests abroad. The Constitution divides the authority for making foreign policy between the legislative and executive branches. The State Department maintains a network of embassies under the direction of the president. Diplomats send and receive messages to foreign heads of state on behalf of the president and negotiate treaties and trade agreements.²⁸

Fairfax County, Virginia has produced a matrix that is helpful in illustrating how power is distributed among the various levels of government.²⁹ (Next page)

Separation of Powers

Here is a description of the separation of powers at the federal level:

The United States Constitution is *deliberately* inefficient.

The Separation of Powers devised by the framers of the Constitution was designed to do one primary thing: to prevent the majority from ruling with an iron fist. Based on their experience, the framers shied away from giving any branch of the new government too much power. The separation of powers provides a system of shared power known as [Checks and Balances](#).

²⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pennsylvania_General_Assembly

²⁸ Responsibilities of the Federal Government, <http://peopleof.oureverydaylife.com/responsibilities-federal-government-7908.html>

²⁹ <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dmb/federal-state-local-government-responsibilities.pdf>

<i>Exclusive Powers of the Federal Government</i>	<i>Exclusive Powers of State Government</i>	<i>Powers Shared by the Federal and State Governments</i>	<i>Services Typically Provided by Local Govt.</i>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Print money (bills and coins)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Establish local governments	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Establish courts	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Education
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Declare war	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Issue licenses (driver's, marriage, etc.)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Create and collect taxes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Police
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Establish an army and navy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Regulate intrastate commerce	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Build highways	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Fire
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Enter into treaties with foreign governments	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Conduct elections	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Borrow money	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Human Services
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Regulate commerce between states and international trade	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Ratify amendments to the U.S. Constitution	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Make and enforce laws	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Public Works (construction and maintenance of all county-owned or operated assets, and services like sewers, solid waste and stormwater management)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Establish post offices and issue postage	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Provide for public health and public safety	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Charter banks and corporations	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Urban Planning/Zoning
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Make laws necessary to enforce the Constitution	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Exercise powers neither delegated to the national government or prohibited from the states by the U.S. Constitution	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Spend money for the betterment of the general welfare of residents	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Economic Development
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Establish a State Constitution (e.g., set legal drinking and smoking ages)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Transportation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Parks and Recreation

Three branches are created in the Constitution. The Legislative, composed of the House and Senate, is set up in [Article 1](#). The Executive, composed of the President, Vice-President, and the Departments, is set up in [Article 2](#). The Judicial, composed of the federal courts and the Supreme Court, is set up in [Article 3](#).

Each of these branches has certain powers, and each of these powers is limited, or checked, by another branch.

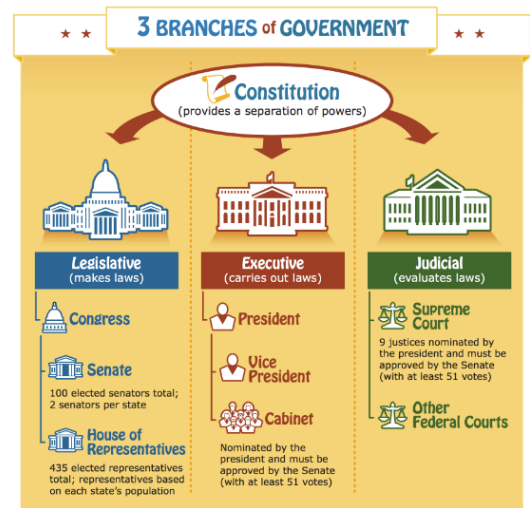
For example, the President appoints judges and departmental secretaries. But these appointments must be approved by the Senate. The Congress can pass a law, but the President can veto it. The Supreme Court can rule a law to be unconstitutional, but the Congress, with the States, can amend the Constitution.

All of these checks and balances, however, are inefficient. But that's by design rather than by accident. By forcing the various branches to be accountable to the others, no one branch can usurp enough power to become dominant.

The following are the powers of the Executive: veto power over all bills; appointment of judges and other officials; makes treaties; ensures all laws are carried out; commander in chief of the military; pardon power. The checks can be found on the [Checks and Balances](#) Page.

The following are the powers of the Legislature: Passes all federal laws; establishes all lower federal courts; can override a Presidential veto; can impeach the President. The checks can be found on the [Checks and Balances](#) Page.

The following are the powers of the Judiciary: the power to try federal cases and interpret the laws of the nation in those cases; the power to declare any law or executive act unconstitutional. The checks can be found on the [Checks and Balances](#) Page.³⁰

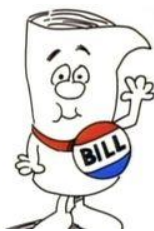


Like the federal government, Pennsylvania has the same three branches of government with its separation of powers. The actual checks may differ, but the functions are essentially the same.

How Legislation Is Made

Federal Legislation

Schoolhouse Rock described the basic process for federal legislation in its famous 1976 segment "I'm Just a Bill," featuring a song of the same title written by [Dave Frishberg](#). It's now available on YouTube.³¹



Here is a more adult version of the basic procedure for making laws at the federal level, described from the perspective of the House of Representatives:

Laws begin as ideas. First, a representative sponsors a bill. The bill is then assigned to a committee for study. If released by the committee, the bill is put on a calendar to be voted on, debated or amended. If the bill passes by simple majority (218 of 435), the bill moves to the Senate. In the Senate, the bill is assigned to another committee and, if released, debated and voted on. Again, a simple majority (51 of 100) passes the bill. Finally, a conference committee made of House and Senate members works out any differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill. The resulting bill returns to the House and Senate for final approval. The Government Printing Office prints the revised bill in a process called enrolling. The President has 10 days to sign or veto the enrolled bill.³²

³⁰ Constitutional Topic: Separation of Powers, https://www.usconstitution.net/consttop_sepp.html

³¹ I'm Just a Bill, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-eYBZFEzf8>

³² https://www.house.gov/content/learn/legislative_process/

This same basic procedure applies for legislation that originates in the Senate. It should be noted that in some cases, identical or very similar legislation may be introduced in both the House and Senate. Over time, depending on movement through committees and on the floor, one of the bills becomes the main vehicle for the final legislation, and as described above, a conference committee works out the differences or makes compromises in preparation for final approval in both chambers.

Other forms of action include Joint Resolutions, Concurrent Resolutions, and Simple Resolutions.³³

Vote Smart provides a more complete description of the process from beginning to end.³⁴

Of course, passage of a bill into law is never quite as simple as the description above, and both chambers sometimes tinker with their rules, complicating the process even further.

There are several websites that track bills that have been introduced and provide important information that is helpful in understanding the bills, knowing who introduced and supports them as co-sponsors, where the bills are in the process, and votes that have taken place. Free services include Congress.gov (<https://www.congress.gov/>) and GovTrack (<https://www.govtrack.us/>). This is important information to have for those who wish to engage in advocacy.

State Legislation

The Legal Research Center of the Thomas R. Kline School of Law at Drexel University provides a concise summary of the legislative process in Pennsylvania:

The first step in creating a Pennsylvania legislative history is understanding the Pennsylvania legislative process. The Pennsylvania state legislature is called the Pennsylvania General Assembly. There are two houses: the House of Representatives and the Senate.

This is a summary overview of the Pennsylvania legislative process:

Step 1: The idea for a bill is conceived and developed by one or more legislators.

Step 2: At the request of the sponsoring legislator(s), the text of the **bill** is drafted by the Legislative Reference Bureau.

Step 3: Chief Clerk of House (or Senate) assigns a bill number to the bill.

Step 4: Speaker of House (or President Pro Tempore of Senate) assigns the bill to a standing committee.

Step 5: The Committee considers the bill, holds hearings, takes evidence, and decides whether to support the bill.

Step 6: If the Committee supports bill, it is presented to the entire chamber (House or Senate) on three separate days for consideration.

Step 7: If the bill (1) requires an expenditure of funds or (2) results in a loss of revenue for the Commonwealth, the bill must be sent to the Appropriations Committee while it is being considered. The Appropriations Committee provides a fiscal note for each bill it receives that indicates how much the law would cost the Commonwealth if enacted.

Step 8: During its days of consideration, legislators may debate or comment on the bill. These debates and comments are recorded in the House and Senate Journals.

Step 9: On the third day of consideration, the entire chamber votes on the bill.

³³ https://www.house.gov/content/learn/legislative_process/

³⁴ <https://votesmart.org/education/how-a-bill-becomes-law#.WaB2UbKGMdU>

Step 10: If the chamber approves the bill, it is sent to the other chamber for approval—Steps 4 through 8 are repeated.

Step 11: Once both chambers have passed identical versions of the **bill**, it is sent to the Governor.

Step 12: If the Governor signs the bill, it becomes law and is given an “Act” number.³⁵

The Pennsylvania House of Representatives provides a more detailed description of the process in its publication “Making Law Pennsylvania: Legislation in the PA House of Representatives.”³⁶

³⁵ <http://drexellaw.libguides.com/c.php?g=366032&p=2473350>

³⁶ <http://www.pacapitol.com/Resources/PDF/Making-Law-In-PA.pdf>

Role of Government/Role of Citizenship from a Faith Perspective

What Constitutes “Good Government”?

Government exists for the sake of the common good, providing the necessary organization and services for a just society.

Elaborating on that theme, the *Principles for Public Advocacy* of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches says:

We believe that in a good society, those with political authority have a responsibility to provide justice for all. Elected officials are entrusted with managing the shared resources of the people and ensuring that decisions are made with justice and transparency. If government works as intended, its services, such as public safety and security, health, community and human services and public education, benefit the common good and address the needs of all citizens. We believe government has an especially significant role in protecting those who are weak and vulnerable—those who are unable to protect themselves.

We believe that all persons should have a voice in government at all levels—including the right to vote—and that access not be limited because of situational factors such as economic disadvantages or distance, or demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, disability, or sexual orientation. Government exists for the sake of the common good, providing the necessary organization and services for a just society.³⁷

A 1995 publication of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America called “Christian Faith and U.S. Political Life Today” speaks about government in this way:

The Gospel and civil government are two important and different ways which God works. Through the Gospel God redeems a sinful world. Government is necessary for our life together, but it is not our saving hope. We confuse the Gospel with a political agenda if we identify a given political position as “Christian.” Because of the Gospel, we are freed to look critically at policies we may have supported in the past, and to be open to changes that will better serve the public good.

It also says:

Government is a means through which God works to preserve creation...God ordains government to help maintain a peaceful and just social order in a sinful world...Government has a distinct divine calling “to maintain peace, to establish justice, to protect and advance human rights, and to promote the general welfare of all persons.”

According to scripture, good government promotes justice and righteousness and upholds the needs of the poor and vulnerable.

For example:

- **Amos 5:23-24:** ²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
- **Deuteronomy 16:18-20:** ¹⁸ You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people. ¹⁹ You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the



³⁷ <http://www.pachurchesadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Principles.pdf>

wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.²⁰ Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

- **Proverbs 31:8-9:** ⁸ Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. ⁹ Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

The United Nations Development Programme provided an excellent non-religious description of “Characteristics of Good Governance” in its 1997 policy paper entitled “Governance for Sustainable Human Development.”

- **Participation:** All men and women should have a voice in decision-making, either directly or through legitimate intermediate institutions that represent their interests. Such broad participation is built on freedom of association and speech, as well as capacities to participate constructively.
- **Rule of law:** Legal frameworks should be fair and enforced impartially, particularly the laws on human rights.
- **Transparency:** Transparency is built on the free flow of information. Processes, institutions and information are directly accessible to those concerned with them, and enough information is provided to understand and monitor them.
- **Responsiveness:** Institutions and processes try to serve all stakeholders.
- **Consensus orientation:** Good governance mediates differing interests to reach a broad consensus on what is in the best interests of the group and, where possible, on policies and procedures.
- **Equity:** All men and women have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being.
- **Effectiveness and efficiency:** Processes and institutions produce results that meet needs while making the best use of resources.
- **Accountability:** Decision-makers in government, the private sector and civil society organisations are accountable to the public, as well as to institutional stakeholders. This accountability differs depending on the organisations and whether the decision is internal or external to an organisation.
- **Strategic vision:** Leaders and the public have a broad and long-term perspective on good governance and human development, along with a sense of what is needed for such development. There is also an understanding of the historical, cultural and social complexities in which that perspective is grounded.³⁸

Put simply, good government ensures justice for ALL and permits ALL to have a voice in how it accomplishes this. It is accountable and transparent concerning how it functions. It operates under a commonly understood rule of law, and manages resources efficiently and effectively.

What Are Christians Called to Do?

Government is successful only insofar as it enjoys the confidence of the governed. Our faith calls for us to be good citizens. However, the highest allegiance of the Christian is to God’s call to justice and peace. This means that we must be attentive to what our elected officials and policy makers are doing; sometimes it means we must act when we believe our laws, policies, or government activities are unjust. As Christians, it requires us to live in a tension between trust in those we have elected to represent us and the willingness to disapprove and demand justice when they are not protecting the common good and the best interests of all.

So, what must we do to live and act as good citizens with respect to God’s call to justice?

³⁸ <http://www.gdrc.org/u-gov/g-attributes.html>

We Must Understand How Government Works

This is self-explanatory. The previous section provides an overview of our government structure, including the responsibilities of each level of government. We cannot know where to focus our efforts if we don't have a basic understanding of how the system works.

Know Your Elected Officials

Knowing who represents you at each level of government is necessary if you want to direct your questions, concerns, and actions to the persons who hold the power to respond to your specific concern. For example:

- If you are concerned about gun violence in your community, your local city or other municipal elected officials are the persons you need to speak with.
- If you are concerned about school funding or how education funds will be spent, you may need to speak with your local school board, and also with your state level elected officials.
- If you are concerned with immigration policy, you may need to speak with state officials where state legislation and policies are being proposed, or with federal officials where federal legislation and policies are being proposed.
- If you are concerned with trade policy or international affairs, you would need to speak with your federal elected officials.
- If you are concerned with budgets and how money is proposed to be spent, it depends on the level of government where specific proposals are being made.

Taking your concerns to the wrong officials wastes both their time and yours, as they will not be able to act to address your problem or request.

An easy way to learn the names and contact information of many of your elected officials is to go to <https://org2.salsalabs.com/o/5415/getLocal.jsp> and enter your zip code plus four (it offers help in finding the plus four if you need it). Connecting at this link leads you to basic contact information for your elected officials at the municipal, county, state, and federal levels. Once you have their names, it is easier to find additional information you might need.

Be Informed—Pay Attention!

“Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”

— Karl Barth

As people of faith, we have a responsibility to pay attention to what is happening in our communities, in our nation, and throughout the world.

So how do we stay informed, and how do we make our voices heard? We must seek out the wealth of information that is available from a multitude of sources. Read your local paper and follow other local media to stay informed about what is happening in your own community. Read national and international publications and follow other media that cover what is happening in our country and throughout the world. Seek

out balanced news reporting. Don't just follow sources that suit your particular world view, theology, or political perspective—look to see what is being said from a range of perspectives. In an age of “fake news,” be aware of your sources—make sure they are credible sources, and that they are reporting actual news and not opinions.

A 2013 article posted at the First Amendment Center website entitled “Who holds the news media accountable? We all do” provides some helpful insights into media accountability. This article says:

In today’s world, increasingly it is citizen-critics or organizations outside mainstream journalism, empowered by the Web’s ability for two-way conversations and comments, and by independence from past restraints of expensive printing presses and broadcast machinery.³⁹

The Society of Professional Journalists’ Ethics Committee encourages “use of the Society’s Code of Ethics, which promotes the highest professional standards for journalists of all disciplines.”⁴⁰ It may be worth asking if journalists and/or publications whose work you may be following adhere to this Code of Ethics.

There are also a number of “fact checker” sites that have arisen over the past few years. The sites provided here are considered to be non-partisan:

- FactCheck.org: <http://www.factcheck.org/>
- Open Secrets (Center for Responsive Politics): <https://www.opensecrets.org/>
- Politifact: <http://www.politifact.com/>
- Snopes.com: <http://www.snopes.com/>
- The Sunlight Foundation: <http://hallofjustice.sunlightfoundation.com/>
- Washington Post’s Fact Checker: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/?utm_term=.0e8583d11c41

When in doubt, it is best to check into articles/claims that raise concerns about reliability.

It also helps to be aware of legislative and policy making activities in your community, state, and at the federal level. While the media may be helpful with regard to high profile legislation, policies, and activities, they do not always follow less public actions that may be of concern to the faith community, or to individuals.

If you are interested in particular issues—for example, environment or education—it helps to become involved or to follow organizations that have similar interests. Many have e-mail networks, Facebook pages, or other means of following through social media. While there are sites that offer legislative monitoring services at a price, sites like Congress.gov (<https://www.congress.gov/>) and GovTrack (<https://www.govtrack.us/>) offer options to search for and/or receive notifications about federal legislation that may be important to you at no cost. In Pennsylvania, the General Assembly website provides a no-cost option to sign up for legislative notifications for state level legislation at <https://www.legis.state.pa.us/login/>.

Question

While much legislation is obvious as to its intended consequences, not all legislation is what it appears to be on the surface. This is where being informed becomes very important. Reading legislation is not easy, and it is sometimes written so as to obscure specific intent. Being connected with a reliable source that you trust with regard to the issues that are important to you is probably the best way that you can be alerted when legislation may have unintended (or intentionally obscure) consequences.

It is also the case that legislators are not always aware of the consequences of legislation that they sponsor or say they support. Literally hundreds of bills may be crossing the desks of legislators, and they typically do not read every bill that is placed before them. They may be relying on colleagues, staffers, written summaries, or other means of gaining

³⁹ <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/who-holds-the-news-media-accountable-we-all-do/>

⁴⁰ <http://www.spj.org/ethics.asp>

knowledge about a bill, and so may be unaware of the potential consequences of one or more pieces of a bill. It is important to ask your legislators if they are aware of some of the possible consequences—some have been known to withdraw support upon learning that proposed legislation may have some negative ramifications.

If what you see and understand about the bills and policies that are important to you raise any concerns, it is very important to raise questions with your legislators as early as possible so that they are aware.

Participate

There are numerous ways that people of faith can participate and play a role in the political process:

- Letters, calls, and visits to elected officials
- Letters to the editor
- Attendance at public meetings
- Supporting voter registration efforts and encouraging others to vote
- Engaging in collective witness (vigils, rallies, etc.)
- Attending educational events around important issues



These will be addressed in more detail in the next section of this guide.

Lead

Time and circumstances may prevent it, but some may feel called to leadership. For some, it may be a call to professional employment related to civic engagement. For others, it may mean organizing events, letter-writing campaigns, or meetings with elected officials. It may also simply mean that you take some initiative in alerting your friends, neighbors and families about important legislation or issues. Specifically how one engages in leadership is an individual thing, and not all are called (or required) to take on this role.

Why Do So Many Fail to Live Up to the Call to Faithful Citizenship?

United Methodist pastor Rebekah Jordan Gienapp writes:

Churches are continually engaging in ministries of mercy and compassion with people who are vulnerable. Whether it's starting a food pantry to respond to neighbors who are hungry or offering tutoring at the nearby elementary school, countless people of faith are ready to become involved.

What happens when a problem is so large or complicated that it can't be solved through charitable efforts alone? How are we to understand the prophet Micah's call "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, NRSV)?

Struggling with questions like these prompts some Christians to advocate for more just laws at the local, state, or federal level. Yet, the political realm can be difficult to understand, a bit messy, and even demoralizing at times.

Why should the church engage in advocacy?⁴¹

Rev. Gienapp identifies the problem—"the political realm can be difficult to understand, a bit messy, and even demoralizing at times." Yes, it can—most of the time—and more often than not it may feel as if our work is for naught. She identifies another problem as well:

⁴¹ <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/5477/should-christians-engage-in-advocacy>

Sometimes the biggest barrier is figuring out what we can do with limited time and the seemingly unlimited problems facing our communities and our world.⁴²

This seems like a good starting point.

Limited Time

We live in a world where time seems to come at a premium. Many—perhaps most—of us work, and some work much more than a “traditional” 40-hour work week. For some, work schedules are variable and/or unpredictable. Many of us have significant family commitments—kids and school (and church or other place of worship), our own participation in school, religious, civic, or other organizations, care for aging or ailing relatives, and just the responsibilities of everyday life—cooking, cleaning, etc. It may feel like there just aren’t enough hours in a day to add anything else. But it doesn’t take much! As we say in every issue of the Council’s News and Action Summary:

Please know that you aren’t expected to act on everything! Just choose the issues that are most important to you and do something!

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.”⁴³ It may feel that way, and probably would be if you are the only one doing it. Your action, joined with others, as Gandhi proved in his efforts to gain Indian independence, can be very significant. Small efforts can easily be incorporated into your daily life without much disruption.

Feelings of Fear or Intimidation

Many people of faith shy away from civic engagement for fear of saying or doing the wrong thing or because they are intimidated by elected officials who seem to be more important than we are. This is understandable. Elected officials are public figures, known by many, and they often don’t share our attitudes and convictions about important matters of law and policy. We may believe they know significantly more than we do about any given issue because of their position. Some elected officials cultivate an aura of importance, suggesting that they and their opinions are more important than yours because of their position of power.

While understandable, these are feelings that must be put aside. Elected officials hold the offices they do because “we the people” elected them. They hold no power beyond what we are willing to cede to them. And often, many of us may be better informed about any given issue because these officials must contend with dozens, and perhaps hundreds of issues on a regular basis. Unless an issue happens to fit within their own specific area of expertise, you, in fact, may be the expert, and you may be just the person to educate them about the issue at hand.

It still isn’t easy to confront an elected official when you disagree with him/her. There are many resources available to help in this work so that you can speak with reasonable knowledge to your elected officials. And when it comes to visits with your officials, the best strategy—even if you don’t feel fear or intimidation—is to make your visits with others. Acting with people who share your interest and concerns can help build the confidence of all and your credibility with the elected official.

Can We Really Make a Difference?

This question is closely related to the question of limited time—will the limited effort we are able to make result in the difference that we seek? Again, consider Gandhi’s words. If we are the lone voice crying in the wilderness (unless we happen to be John the Baptist), our small individual efforts may not. On the other hand, when we join with others, we can raise a mighty collective voice that absolutely can make a difference—even if it is only to prevent something much worse from happening.

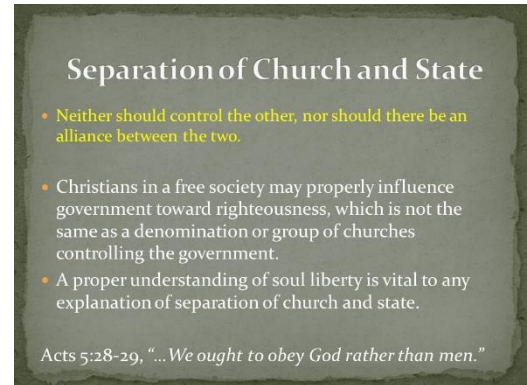
⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/17453-whatever-you-do-will-be-insignificant-but-it-is-very>

Also, you may find that you are able to make a difference with your own elected officials. It is a reason why building a relationship with your elected officials is important. If they begin to see you as an honest, passionate but rational, representative constituent that truly understands and cares about the issue at hand, you may find that you are able to be heard—and if you can make a difference with them, they may be able to influence others as well. We can never predict when the seed we have scattered will take root and bear fruit.

But What About the Separation of Church and State?

The concept of a wall of separation between church and state does not actually appear in the Constitution. However, there is little question that the framers of this document believed that such separation is implied in the words of what is known as the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment to the Constitution—“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The concept did appear in the letter written by Thomas Jefferson, cited earlier in this document, which was further discussed in First Amendment Center senior scholar Charles Haynes’ “Frame of Reference” for today. One tenet (#5) of his Frame of Reference helps to build understanding:



Religion, public life and politics.

The First Amendment separated church from state but not religion from public life.

- 1) The involvement of religious groups in public life. Many religious groups consider it an article of faith to speak out on issues of moral concern in the public sphere. The Constitution protects the right of religious individuals and organizations to attempt to shape public policy and to exercise their influence. There are presently hundreds of nonprofit groups concerned with religious issues and public life in the United States.
- 2) Tax-exempt status dependent on nonpartisanship. However, religious organizations that are exempt from taxation under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code may not engage in partisan politics by endorsing or opposing candidates for public office or by spending a substantial amount of their resources lobbying Congress.⁴⁴

The Establishment Clause/"separation of church and state" is designed to keep the state from establishing an official religion—something that many of our nation’s earliest settlers came to escape—but is not meant to limit freedom of conscience. What does limit faith communities as entities from engaging in partisan politics or extensive lobbying does not have to do with the “wall of separation,” but with their tax-exempt status under the IRS Code Section 501(c)(3). What houses of worship may do will be covered in some detail in the next section.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

How Christians Can Live Out the Call to Faithful Citizenship

There are numerous ways that people of faith can live out God's call to faithful citizenship—as individuals, as communities of faith/houses of worship, and as denominations/faith traditions. Many of the ways are described below, but the list is endless and only limited by one's creativity and commitment.

How Individuals Can Be Faithful Citizens

Becoming Informed/Educated About the Issues

The previous section addressed the many ways that we can become informed citizens and become educated about the issues that are important to us.

Being informed, however, means also knowing who the candidates are and their positions—at every level of government. Candidates will typically have websites where they may lay out their positions and platforms, but it is also important to look at independent, non-partisan analyses of their positions. Many special interest organizations present voter guides that show where each candidate stands with regard to the positions important to them. However, perhaps the best voter guides are provided by the League of Women Voters around each election. The League is one of the most credible and respected non-partisan organizations, and its purpose is to help citizens carry out their responsibility as voters. Pennsylvania has a state level chapter and also provides a lot of good information about issues that are important to voters at <https://www.palwv.org/>.

Registering to Vote—and Voting!

Voting is not only a right—it's our duty as citizens. The following information about how to register and eligibility is provided by <http://www.dmv.org/pa-pennsylvania/voter-registration.php> except as otherwise indicated. Additional information and frequently asked questions are available at <https://www.palwv.org/information-for-pennsylvania-voters/>.



To register to vote in Pennsylvania, you must:

- Have been a **U.S. citizen** for at least 1 month before the next election.
- Be 18 years old **by the next election**.
- Have been a **resident of Pennsylvania** and the district you wish to vote in for at least 30 days before the next election.

To vote in the next election in PA, you must be registered as a voter at least 30 days before the election date.

In Pennsylvania, you can register to vote **online, by mail or in person**. You **cannot** register to vote **by phone**.

Online

The state's [online voter application](#) allows you to **complete and submit your application online**.

Once you submit the application online, it will be reviewed by your [county voter registration office](#); you are **not registered to vote** until you **receive your voter registration card**.

While the state allows an "electronic signature" for you to complete the online application, PennDOT **must have your physical signature on file** before it will approve your voter registration application.

Generally, PennDOT will forward your signature to your county voter registration office; this is the **signature you have on file for your driver's license or identification card**.

Refer to the state's section on [online voter registration](#) for more information on application signature options.

By Mail or In Person

To register to vote by mail or in person, **complete** a [Pennsylvania Voter Registration Mail Application Form](#) (DSBE-600) and take or mail it to your [PA county Board of Elections office](#).

You can also take the completed form in person to:

A government agency office. (Visit the [elections website](#) for a list of agencies.)

OR

A PennDOT photo license center when you apply for or renew your PA driver's license.

You can request the form to be sent to you by [e-mailing](#) the following information:

Full name.

Mailing address.

The number of forms you need.

NOTE: Once your voter registration office processes your application, you will be sent a voter identification card **by mail**. If you do not receive your PA voter ID card within 14 days, you should contact your [county voter registration office](#) directly.

If you vote regularly you do **NOT** need to register again unless you need to change your address, name, or party affiliation. It is important to make sure you are eligible to vote before an election by checking your registration status.⁴⁵

Those on parole and/or probation are eligible to vote. If you are incarcerated for a felony conviction you are not eligible to vote. Voting rights are automatically restored when you are no longer incarcerated, and you should re-register to vote.⁴⁶

Once you are registered, it is imperative that you vote in EVERY election—not just every four years in the presidential election. Every election is important, but it is the elections at the local level that often have the greatest effect on our daily lives. Pennsylvanians have an opportunity to vote twice each year—general elections happen the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November,⁴⁷ and primary elections take place in May to determine the candidates for the general elections.⁴⁸ Elections for federal and state level offices take place in even years, and elections for other offices are often held in odd years.

And there are many good reasons to vote, but four stand out:

- If you do not vote, you give others the power to make decisions for you
- Failing to vote gives a small portion of Americans great power over the majority
- Voting is a privilege, don't squander it
- Silence implies consent⁴⁹

⁴⁵ <https://www.pavoterservices.pa.gov/Pages/VoterRegistrationStatus.aspx>

⁴⁶ <https://www.pavoterservices.pa.gov/Pages/VoterRegistrationApplication.aspx>

⁴⁷ If a Tuesday falls on November 1, the election will not take place until November 8.

⁴⁸ However, if you are registered as an Independent, you may only vote in the primary if ballot questions are included. You must be registered with a party to vote to determine the party's candidates for the general election.

⁴⁹ Four Reasons You Should Vote in the Presidential Election, <https://americanmajority.org/blog-2/four-reasons-you-should-vote-in-the-presidential-election/>; please note that this does not apply only to presidential elections.

A fifth should probably be added, given the growing practice of purging voting roles in many states for a variety of reasons. Voters in places where this has happened often don't know they've been purged until it is too late to do something about it. It is always a good idea to ensure that your own registration status is current at <https://www.votespa.com/Register-to-Vote/Pages/Check-Your-Voter-Registration-Status.aspx> before the period for registration ends 30 days prior to an upcoming election.

Encouraging Others to Register and Vote

All the information you need to do this is contained in the previous section.

Making Your Views Known to Elected Officials

There are many vehicles available for making your views known to elected officials—and it is important that you do make your views known! Most officials admit that they often get very few contacts from constituents—and that a very few contacts can influence their own actions based on the feedback they receive.



Here are the basic mechanisms for making your voice heard. All of the information below (plus a bit more) is available for download at http://www.pachurchesadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/advocacy_contact_tips-1.pdf.

General

- Cultivate a relationship with your legislators. They are more likely to listen if they know you.
- Cultivate a relationship with “staffers” to your legislators and decision makers. They can be valuable in getting your views before them.
- Keep track, to the extent possible, of relevant committee meetings, public hearings, and other opportunities when your actions on issues important to you will have maximum impact.
- Communications should be short, polite, and to the point.
- If there is a specific bill number or common title, it is helpful to identify the issue in that way.
- While it is appropriate in some circumstances to send communications to legislative leaders (majority/minority leaders, committee chairs, etc.), your communications are most effective when sent to your own legislators.
- Be sure to thank legislators and decision makers for their positive response, as well as to express your disappointment with negative responses.
- If you don't know who your U.S. legislators are:
 - If you don't know your Representative's name: <http://www.house.gov> (upper left, enter zip code)
 - If you don't know your Senators' names: <http://www.senate.gov> (upper right, choose state)
- If you don't know who your Pennsylvania legislators are:
<http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/home/findyourlegislator/index.cfm#address>

Letters, Faxes, Personal e-mails

- A page or less is optimal.
- Letters work best when they follow some basic guidelines:
 - Address the recipient by name. Legislators are typically addressed “The Honorable” in the address, and the salutation varies by position. For U.S. and Pennsylvania senators, the salutation should read “Dear

Senator _____.” For the U.S. and Pennsylvania Houses of Representatives, it should read “Dear Representative.” Other salutations depend on the position.⁵⁰

- Limit your correspondence to one topic, and identify that topic immediately, preferably in a reference line (i.e., “RE: _____.”).
- Be polite.
- State your position (support or opposition), and say why you are advocating for your position. Provide facts, examples, and explain how the legislation or policy will affect you or whatever group(s) you represent. BE SPECIFIC.
- Reiterate your position.
- Thank the addressee for his or her attention and cooperation.
- Include your full name, address, and any other appropriate contact information.
- Calling to get the name of a key staff member who is working on the issue you are writing about and sending a copy to that person may enhance the likelihood that your voice will be heard.

NOTE: Because of stringent security within the federal mail system (following the anthrax scare in 2001-2002), it may be best to send letters to the district offices of your senators and representative, and/or to fax or e-mail the letter, particularly if the issue is time-sensitive.

Calling Your Legislators and Decision Makers

- Be polite.
- Identify yourself to the person answering the phone, letting him or her know that you are a constituent, and noting any appropriate affiliations (faith tradition, judicatory body, Pennsylvania Council of Churches, etc.).
- If your legislator or decision maker is not available (usually the case), ask for an appropriate staff person. If neither is available, you may leave your comments with the person answering the phone.
- State the issue and your position, and comment briefly on why you are advocating for this position.
- Thank the person you are speaking with for listening to/sharing your concerns.

Visiting Your Legislators and Decision-Makers⁵¹

- Make an appointment to ensure that the legislator/decision maker/critical staff members will be in the office and available to meet with you. Sometimes it is easier and may be more beneficial to meet with the appropriate staff person(s).
- It is often easiest to meet in a district office when the U.S. Congress or the Pennsylvania General Assembly are not in session, so that you will not be competing with hearings, committee meetings, votes, or other demands on your representatives’ time.
- Be polite.
- As with letters and other written communications, keep your comments brief and to the point. Following the outline for letters (provided above) is a good rule of thumb.

⁵⁰ The President should be addressed as “Dear Mr. President,” the Governor as “Dear Governor _____,” mayors as “Dear Mayor _____.” When the appropriate salutation is otherwise unknown, a simple “Dear Sir/Madam” or “Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. (etc.) _____” is usually appropriate.

⁵¹ A generic visit planning document is available at <http://www.pachurchesadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Lobby-Visit-Form-Generic.pdf>.

- Be prepared to leave written information/packets behind to provide additional information—including contact information for persons to respond to questions that may arise.
- Thank the person/persons you have met with for listening to/sharing your concerns.

Finally—don't forget to send a thank you note (hard copy or e-mail is acceptable) to the elected official/staffer with any follow-up promised during the visit.

Writing Letters to the Editor/Op-Eds

Writing a letter-to-the-editor is one of the best ways to alert your elected officials about an issue that you care deeply about. In a letter-to-the-editor, you have the opportunity to share your opinion, educate the public about an issue, applaud someone for taking a desired action, or express disappointment when an official fails to act or acts in an undesirable manner. A well written, well timed letter to the editor can shift public opinion and influence policy.

Elected officials and their staff members carefully monitor newspapers to gauge local opinion. **By mentioning your elected officials by name**, and stating the specific action you would like them to take, you can guarantee that your letter will catch their attention.

In addition to getting the attention of elected officials, letters-to-the-editor are a tremendous advocacy tool because they reach a large audience, can bring up information not addressed in a news article, and can create an impression of widespread support or opposition to an issue.

A complete guide to help you in writing letters to the editor is available at http://www.pachurchesadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Letters_to_the_Editor.pdf.

Permissible length for letters to the editor, depending on the outlet, may vary from as little as 100 words to 250 to 300 words. You'll need to check with the target paper to determine what is allowable.

Another option, should you feel that a letter doesn't provide sufficient space to state your position adequately, is an op-ed, or opinion editorial. Many newspapers will print longer pieces from individuals if they believe they provide important perspectives on important issues. The process is similar to writing a letter to the editor, except that typically the allowable length is from around 600 to 800 words.

What Congregations Can Do

Clergy may have a voice, but must be clear that they are speaking as individuals, not on behalf of a congregation or denomination. It is probably best not to speak about favored candidates specifically from the pulpit. When speaking to specific issues, one good way of doing so is to use lectionary texts and to be faithful to scripture.

From Wikipedia on congregations and nonprofit tax exempt status:

The **Johnson Amendment** is a provision in the [U.S. tax code](#), since 1954, that prohibits all [501\(c\)\(3\) non-profit organizations](#) from endorsing or opposing political candidates. Section 501(c)(3) organizations are the most common type of nonprofit organization in the United States, ranging from [charitable foundations](#) to universities and churches. The amendment is named for then-Senator [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) of Texas, who introduced it in a preliminary draft of the law in July 1954.⁵²

Rev. Scott Anderson, former executive director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, shared a valuable guide for what congregations can do without violating the Johnson Amendment. This document is contained in Appendix A, and it also provides specific guidelines for: (1) organizing an adult education forum; (2) holding a candidate forum; and (3) conducting a voter registration drive.

⁵² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnson_Amendment.

APPENDIX A

10 THINGS YOUR CONGREGATION CAN DO

Prepared by Scott D. Anderson, Former Executive Director
Wisconsin Council of Churches

(reprinted with permission from Wisconsin Council of Churches Ecu-News, July 2004)

1 **HOLD AN ADULT EDUCATION FORUM ON THE ISSUES**

Organize an adult education forum several weeks in advance of the election to examine the issues being discussed in the fall election at the state and federal level from a faith perspective. See the resource below on organizing an adult education forum for more information.

2 **HOLD A PRESENTATION OF EACH CANDIDATES' VIEWS**

Ask members of your congregation to read about one issue for each candidate, and then hold a "Voters Night." Each person presents a summary of the candidates' view on the issue they studied. This saves everyone from researching all the issues themselves.

3 **ORGANIZE A CANDIDATES FORUM**

Hold a candidate forum. Invite all candidates for a particular office to attend. See the resource below on organizing a candidate forum for more information.

4 **CONDUCT A BIBLE STUDY ON THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CHRISTIAN FAITH AND FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP**

The connections are not obvious to many Christians. Arrange for your congregation to offer a Bible study on the issue prior to the election. Check with your denominational office for good resources.

5 **ORGANIZE VOTER REGISTRATION**

Since many people do not know how or where to register, your congregation can make it easier by organizing a voter registration drive. See the resource below, Conducting a Voter Registration Drive, for more information.

6 **SET A "100% REGISTERED" GOAL**

Become a "100% congregation" by making sure every church member is registered to vote.

7 **PROMOTE "VOTE BY MAIL"**

For voters who cannot make it to the polls, promote the "vote by mail" (also known as an "absentee ballot") option.

8 **OFFER YOUR CONGREGATION AS A POLLING SITE**

Often polling sites need to change. By offering your congregation as a site, you can help your community to vote. Contact your local Registrar of Voters.

9 PROVIDE CHILD CARE AND/OR TRANSPORTATION TO POLLING SITES

Find out who in your congregation and community needs transportation, and then arrange for someone to take them to the polling site. You can also provide child care either at your congregation or right at the polling site (check with your local Registrar of Voters).

10 HAVE A PRAYER SERVICE BEFORE THE ELECTION

Prayer for our elected leaders is important. A special service before the election also can help us remain focused on what is most important in this electoral season.

ORGANIZE AN ADULT EDUCATION FORUM ON THE ELECTION ISSUES

VOTER EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT!

An adult education forum can be an important opportunity to help people see through the 30-second sound bites on political commercials and thoughtfully examine the pros and cons of each ballot measure. Voters in your congregation can then be empowered to make informed decisions at the polls.

WHERE DO I START?

See about scheduling an adult education forum several weeks before the election. It could be held in a congregation, a school, a community center. Invite other congregations/ community groups to join you in co-sponsoring the event. The forum can be offered on a weekly basis, or be presented in one or two evening programs. Be sure to promote the event in the media.

RECRUIT A GOOD FACILITATOR

Good leadership for this forum is critical. The person(s) you recruit should be skilled, knowledgeable and experienced individuals who can lead discussion groups where there is disagreement without injecting their own biases.

DECIDE ON A CLASS FORMAT

Invite participants to choose the issues to be discussed. Then ask participants to research the pro and con positions for each issue being discussed. Ask one or two individuals to be prepared to briefly present either the pro or con position to the class. Ask the facilitator to present a brief overview of the pro and con presentations from class participants. Then invite the class to ask questions and to enter into discussion.

ASK GOOD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this proposal?

Where did it come from? Why is it of concern this year?

How does our religious tradition inform our understanding of and perspective on this proposal?

What are the values that underlie this proposal? How do those values fit with my own?

Within our forum, where can we find agreement in this proposal? Where do we disagree?

What more do I need to know before making an informed decision on this proposal?

SUMMARIZE THE DISCUSSION

A good discussion leader will always summarize the important discussion points that were made and where the group found consensus.

HOLDING A CANDIDATE FORUM

HELP CHANGE THE SPIRIT OF THE CAMPAIGN

A candidate forum can help redefine and redirect a public dialogue that has grown increasingly brutal, mean-spirited and divisive. Faith communities can set the tone and control the forum, and therefore can demand a higher standard of dialogue, sending a powerful message to those in power and those aspiring to power.

HELP SET THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE

Those who attend the forum and those candidates who participate will long remember the moving tales of people struggling to make ends meet and the success stories of community groups beating the odds. Politicians will encounter the moral analysis and compassionate work of the religious community.

RECLAIM THE POLITICAL PROCESS

A lot of people think the political system is too complex for them to understand. Many people do not vote. They just watch from the sidelines. By demystifying the process, helping people to understand what government does and what policy options really mean, a candidate forum encourages people to become involved.

STAY NONPARTISAN AND WITHIN THE LAW

Endorsing or working for or against candidates for public office is absolutely forbidden to nonprofit corporations, and may result in loss of tax-exempt legitimate activity for 501(c)(3) organizations, and they are an important vehicle for informing your community. Should you decide to organize one, you must pay close attention to the law. The most important principle for faith communities to observe is NONPARTISANSHIP.

CHOOSING A FORMAT

A variety of formats is possible. Many candidates have a stump speech and have been trained to give tested answers to any question, designed to shift the debate back to issues that work in the candidate's favor. They may or may not answer the important questions for faith communities.

OPTION 1: Turn the candidates loose, let them give their stump speech and encourage them to say things that they think will appeal to your church and community. After an opening speech, with a set time limit, candidates might respond to each other, be interviewed by a panel, or take questions from the floor. The candidates may prefer this format, but it may not shift the terms or tone of the public debate.

OPTION 2: Have a panel. If a panel is set up to interview the candidates, the moderator and the panel must be prepared to allow follow-up questions. This is especially true if a candidate does not come close to addressing the concerns that have been raised, but simply uses any questions to give packaged answers outlining his/her favorite issues.

OPTION 3: A variation of the panel format has proven very effective. Set up a panel of experts to begin the discussion. Expert panelists may represent issues important to low-income people. The homeless, the hungry, those seeking work or on welfare, or speak on racial justice, immigration, environmental justice and stewardship, or the role of religion in the schools and the future of public education.

OPTION 4: Another format option would have an interview team picked by the congregation quiz the candidates on ten to twelve specific issues. Time could be allotted to the interview team to express concerns of the congregation. If the candidates avoid the issue, follow-up questions could attempt to get a clear answer.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

To host a successful forum:

- assemble a representative panel that can talk about local factors and concerns;
- take the time to prepare the panelists and the moderator;
- get candidates of all political parties to attend and participate;
- appoint a media committee to promote the event and approach your local cable access station;
- get other groups to co-sponsor the event;
- hold the forum at a well-known location away from the faith community if you wish the community-at-large to participate.

CONDUCTING A VOTER REGISTRATION DRIVE

DOES VOTING REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Politicians listen to people who vote—or they’ll be out of a job. In the last three election cycles, an average shift of 10,400 votes in each contest would have changed the outcome of 20 U.S. Senate races.

Elections mean a lot to your life and the lives of people close to you. Changing a couple of votes in the Senate or House—or in the State Legislature—can change what happens to billions of dollars. Helping people register to vote, and reminding others how important it is to vote, gives people a voice and makes a democratic process stronger.

WHAT IS LEGALLY PERMISSIBLE?

Tax-exempt organizations like religious groups may organize and/or participate in voter registration, education, and get out the vote activities without jeopardizing their tax-exempt status, provided the effort is nonpartisan.

Nonpartisan means that the activity or program is not influenced by, affiliated with, or supportive of the interest or policies of any one political party, candidate or referendum. Efforts must focus solely on educating members about the importance of voting without bias for or against any candidate or party.

WHAT SHOULD WE AVOID?

- Do not distribute material on particular candidates, political parties or issues as part of your voter registration drive.
- Do not offer suggestions or opinions on which party people should register for or for whom they should vote.

WHERE DO I START?

1. ENLIST HELP

Begin by identifying others in your congregation who would be interested in helping with a voter registration drive. Share your interest and invite feedback/ideas for how best to proceed. Collaborate with other non-partisan organizations (such as the League of Women Voters).

2. COLLECT INFORMATION

Learn about voter registration laws in your area. Contact your city or county Registrar of Voters to learn about how and where registration is carried out in your community and to order voter registration cards and materials. These officials may provide training sessions for groups who are interested in conducting voter registration drives. You may hold a registration drive in your own faith community, or for the community at large.

3. DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

Remember: voter registration is a year-round process. While upcoming elections establish important registration deadlines, every faith community should consider a year round campaign.

Remind volunteers that the effort is nonpartisan. Volunteers may not advocate particular candidates or suggest how a person should vote. It is a good idea to have volunteers from more than one political party.

You may want to set up a table at coffee hour, providing forms and reminding people of the important responsibility to vote.

Be creative in your outreach efforts. Think about how you might reach those who often do not register and/or do not vote—including youth and low-income people.

4. SPREAD THE WORD

Publicize voter registration efforts in the worship bulletin, congregational newsletter, and from the pulpit. Encourage pastor to address the issues of political responsibility and faithful citizenship.