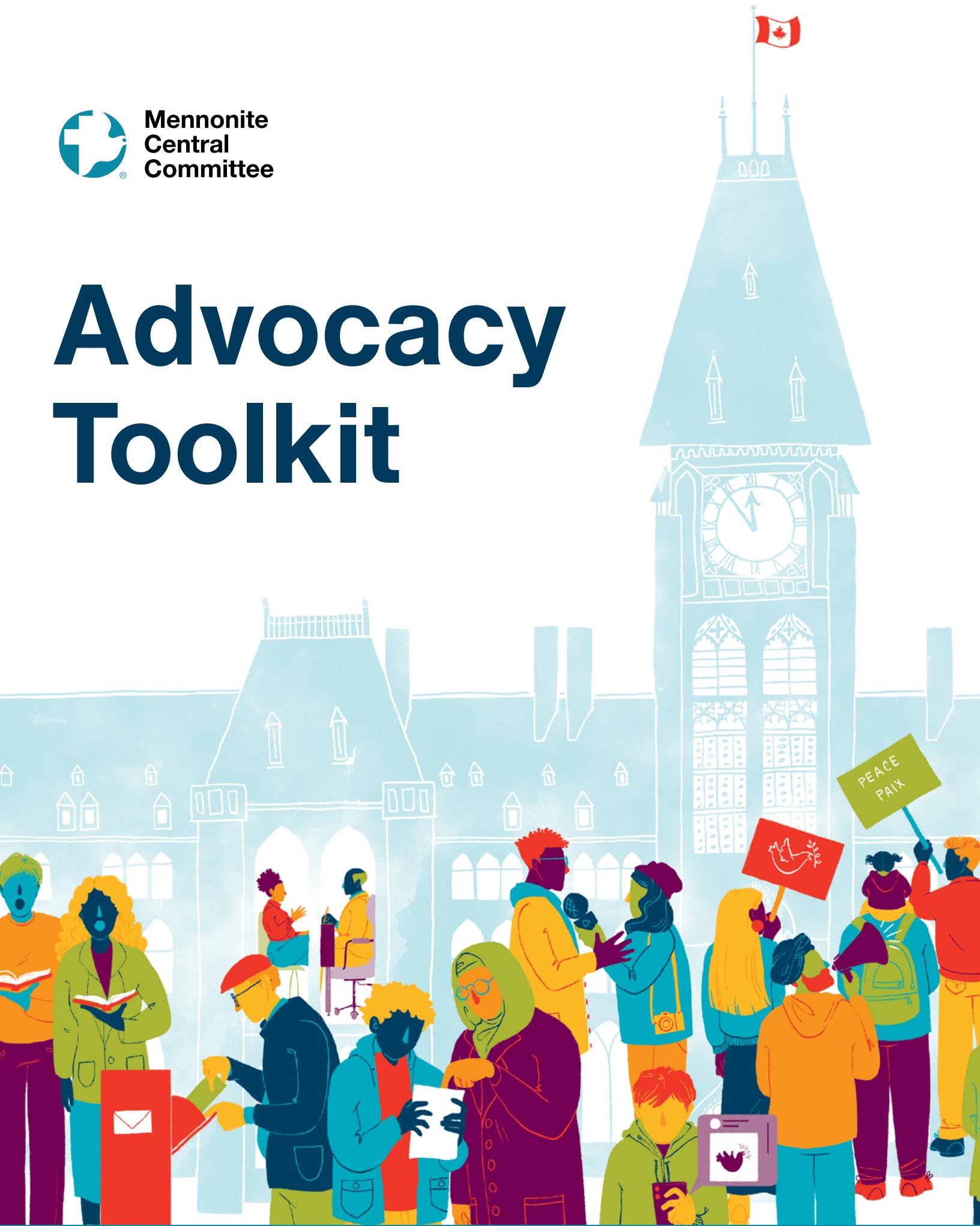




Mennonite
Central
Committee

Advocacy Toolkit



Here's a sneak peek of what you'll find in this resource:

In 2003, as the U.S. was preparing to invade Iraq and was pressuring Canada to join them, Canadians made their voices heard, loudly saying no to the war, and the government listened.

MCC, along with other faith organizations, helped mobilize people to engage in direct advocacy to the government, voicing strong opposition to the war. Thousands of people signed petitions, sent letters, and gathered publicly to protest the war. Eventually, Prime Minister Chrétien decided against official participation in the war. Later he told a Lutheran bishop that the voice of the churches has been critical in his decision, saying “The unanimous opposition expressed by church leaders made a huge difference in the cabinet discussion.”

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1 What is advocacy and why does it matter?

What is advocacy?

Have you ever stood up for someone who was bullied or harassed? Or pushed the medical system to provide better care for a sick relative? Have you participated in a public protest against something you felt was harmful? Then you can consider yourself an advocate! You have probably advocated for yourself, a friend, or your community in some way, whether through the political system or another framework.

What do we mean by advocacy? Quite simply, it means speaking out to create change.

Advocacy has to do with influencing people and systems that hold power, to change behaviours, policies and resource allocation for the betterment of people. Advocacy often involves speaking to government, either at a municipal, provincial or federal level. But advocacy can also be aimed at shifting the attitudes, policies and practices of churches, schools, corporations or society.

Advocacy takes many forms. It can be as simple as writing a letter to your member of Parliament from the privacy of your home. Or it can be as complex as a highly organized campaign involving many people, special events, a sophisticated media strategy, and a range of actions carried out over a sustained period of time. It may include nonviolent direct action and even civil disobedience, or it can be a silent prayer vigil. You will read stories throughout this resource that include examples of people engaging in many different forms of advocacy.



Why does advocacy matter?

Direct service — such as providing food, blankets and relief kits — is essential in contexts of disaster or war, but situations of chronic need require a different response. Advocacy is distinct from other forms of service that work to alleviate human suffering, because it unmasks the structural and systemic causes of poverty, violence, injustice and human indignity, and seeks to address them.

For example, you are involved in direct service, if you:

- **Sew blankets or assemble relief kits for MCC;**
- **Participate in privately sponsoring refugees to come to Canada;**
- **Volunteer at a soup kitchen or food bank.**

You are engaged in advocacy if you:

- **Meet with your MP to urge increased foreign aid or justice for Indigenous peoples;**
- **Sign a petition to call for a ban on the manufacture and use of cluster munitions;**
- **Organize a public peace witness to lament the horrors of war and call for nonviolent responses to conflict.**



For Christians, advocacy is rooted in the biblical call to seek justice for the oppressed. The Bible is filled with stories of people who acted as advocates on behalf of others. For example, Moses advocated repeatedly to Pharaoh for the freedom of his entire people. We are also told that “we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ” (1 John 2:1).

Advocacy can create real change! There are stories of advocacy success throughout this toolkit. Advocacy work can feel slow and discouraging at times. On the inside cover you'll find a story about direct advocacy from thousands that succeeded in keeping Canada out of a war. Meanwhile the story below shares how advocacy and direct service can go hand in hand, and how just one person can create change!

15-year-old Lydianne from Montreal was inspired to take action for peace in Palestine and Israel after hearing a presentation from MCC Quebec staff about the devastation in Gaza following October 7th, 2023. One Sunday morning, she stood in front of her church and delivered a presentation with a proposal. First, she highlighted MCC's commitment to peace, healing, and justice in the region and its partnerships in Palestine since 1949. Then she made an offer: members could donate money and receive homemade brownies, cookies or muffins, and Lydianne would use donations to put together 'trousses' (relief kits). Her goal was \$100. She ended up raising over \$500 and assembling 72 relief kits!

Advocacy and MCC

At MCC, advocacy is one of the tools we use to further our work of humanitarian assistance, community development and peacebuilding. MCC's advocacy efforts arise out of our program work – from the calls of our partners in Canada and around the world. We use advocacy to address government policies and practices that harm people. We propose change that can lessen suffering, foster empowerment, and promote justice and human dignity. We also use advocacy to affirm things the government is doing and to contribute positively to policies we would like to see expanded and strengthened.

Our advocacy is strengthened because it is backed by actions from MCC's supporting communities. We can urge the government to support refugees or implement restorative justice because our communities in Canada are actively engaged in these efforts, which adds credibility to our words.

Advocacy can create real change. Advocacy work can feel slow and discouraging at times, but there are stories of advocacy success throughout this toolkit.

We see advocacy as having two parts:

Political engagement: This is the direct engagement we do with MPs, Senators and civil servants through personal meetings, written emails, coalition letters, submissions to committees, and more.

Public engagement: This is the work we do among our supporters to build awareness about particular issues and to encourage them to engage in advocacy with us.



2 How can I approach advocacy?

People are often inspired to engage in advocacy because they feel passionately about a specific issue and want to do something about it beyond just learning. That is great next step! But from MCC's experience we've learned that before you jump in, it is important to take some time to reflect, prepare and plan to ensure that you are engaging well.

We suggest you consider the following approaches to help you prepare to be a good advocate.

Listen. Advocacy is ultimately about helping to make things right for people. Listen directly to those who are affected by a particular problem. Ask them how you might help to "amplify" their voice. Be guided by their wisdom. Be sure that you are representing their views fairly. If you are directly affected, talk to others around you who might also be affected by the same issue.

Research. Make sure that you know the issue well. Talk to others. Read about the issue carefully and critically. Expose yourself to different viewpoints. Get well-sourced information. Look to reputable organizations and institutions for analysis and insight. Make sure you understand the political, economic, or social systems that interact with the issue, and consider how you can act strategically within those systems to create change.

Collaborate. It is fine to advocate on your own, but it is even better to do it with others! Gather a group of people who share your concerns and want to act on them. Discern together what you are hoping to achieve.

Plan. Take care in planning your advocacy strategy. While there are moments for spontaneous action, your advocacy is likely to be more successful if it is carefully planned. Be clear on your objectives and what you hope to achieve. Anticipate any resistance you may encounter.

Pray. If you are a person of faith, spend time in prayer, seeking wisdom and guidance as you advocate. Pray for strength, courage and perseverance to face disappointment and persist for the long haul.

Reflect. After each step, spend time reflecting on what you've learned so far and how that might change your goals or plans. Consider the ways that you, your group or your community may be contributing to the problem you are seeking to resolve, and what actions you can take directly. Listen again to the people affected.

Applying a peace lens to advocacy

At MCC we believe that our actions and attitudes while engaging in advocacy are part of our message. We believe there is a role for “righteous” anger against injustice. We are also aware that our tone and attitude can contribute to – or mitigate – polarization and violence in our societies. This is why we focus on applying a peace lens to our advocacy, ensuring that we are advocating for peace not just in our policy asks, but by also demonstrating our commitment to peace through our words, actions, and non-partisan engagement.

In practice, this looks like inviting dialogue, listening carefully to people with views that are different from ours, centering the experiences of those most affected by policies and finding common ground to work towards solutions. It can mean assuming the best of those we are speaking to, whether friends and neighbours, or MPs, Senators or public servants, and trying to understand their values, morals, and motivations.

As you engage in advocacy consider how to use tools like curiosity and dialogue as a way of applying a peace lens to your justice work.



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3 How does policy change happen?

When preparing to advocate, one of the most important questions to consider is **who has the power to make the changes I want?** The answer is often the government. Government policy and regulations can provide more foreign aid funding, improve prison conditions, uphold treaty rights, or compel corporations to protect human and environmental rights. Within Canada, policy decisions are made in many ways and by different people, but significant changes to public policy often follow a predictable pattern. Understanding this process will help us focus our efforts to create change.

1. Agenda Setting

Have you ever wondered why certain issues gain political attention while others seem to be forgotten? This all comes down to the first stage of the policy process, agenda setting and problem definition. In this stage, the goal is to convince decision makers that a problem exists, and that they need to do something about it. They may be totally unaware of the situation, or they may not see it as a problem.

Sometimes issues are brought to light because of a specific event or disaster that draws attention to it, but issues can also be raised by the conscious efforts of individuals or groups. In this stage, it is important to remember that the way we frame the issue will significantly impact the proposed solutions. For example, a rise in crime rates might be framed as a failure of the legal system, a result of unjust economic conditions, or the presence of organized crime. The solutions that are proposed to address unjust economic conditions will be very different from the solutions proposed for responding to organized crime. In either case, there is an opportunity to define problems in a way that centers the value of human dignity.

Here's an example of what engaging in advocacy looks like at this stage: as part of MCC's Climate Action for Peace campaign, people from across Canada have been invited to send postcards to the Prime Minister. These postcards don't refer to specific legislation. Instead, they encourage the Prime Minister to consider the disproportionate impact that climate change is having on communities beyond Canada's borders and encourage further funding. Climate change is not a new issue for politicians. Rather, these postcards are part of a concerted effort to emphasize an aspect of climate change that is often overlooked, and to let MPs know that voters care about this issue. Sending a postcard is one way that you can let your legislators know of issues or perspectives that may be missing from the conversation.

2. Policy Formulation

Once an issue is on the agenda, government officials will be tasked with identifying and evaluating possible solutions. This is the policy formulation stage. The government may reach

out through public consultations or seek out the opinion of experts. Bills will be proposed, debated, and voted on in the House of Commons or provincial legislature. At this stage, it is important to reach out directly to your representatives – provincial, municipal, or federal – to influence their votes. Timing is important during this stage. Pay attention to the progress of bills that you care about, so you can call your MP before they vote. The primary spaces for policy debate are in the House of Commons and Senate (federal), Provincial Legislatures, and City Councils (municipal). This is also the stage where most of the public debates take place. To get your message out to the public while they are thinking about the issue, you can consider forms of public engagement such as writing an op-ed.

One example of influencing policy is from 2016, when Canadian Senators were considering a bill to enshrine the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) into law. At this key moment, thousands of Canadians independently sent letters to all Senators, some using MCC's online letter writing tool. These letters, many sent by Mennonites, were referenced by Senators in their debates, demonstrating the impact the letters had on these Senators as they prepared to vote. This is a great example of how to make a difference in the policy formulation stage. Canadians expressed their overwhelming support for the policy, and Senators listened. Although this bill was disrupted by an early election, UNDRIP went on to become Canadian law less than two years later.



In August 2021, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. Because of Canadian anti-terrorism laws, organizations like MCC faced severe restrictions in providing relief. Some organizations couldn't operate at all. MCC joined a coalition of humanitarian agencies to lobby the government to amend these rules. Nearly 10,000 Canadians, including MCC supporters, sent letters in support of Bill C-41, which officially became law on June 20, 2023. This law provided humanitarian exceptions that allow Canadian organizations to deliver humanitarian relief in areas controlled by terrorist organizations.

3. Policy Implementation

The advocacy process isn't done just because a law or policy has been adopted. Rather, we enter the policy implementation phase. During this stage, government agencies are given the responsibility of carrying out the law. They will make decisions about how to deploy resources and interpret how the law will be carried out in practice. The implementation of policy can vary significantly depending on public pressure and the perspectives of the individuals responsible for carrying out the law.

One way that we can influence the policy implementation stage is by raising awareness of how government policy is impacting our communities and raise any gaps we see to adequately address the problem. One example is holding Canadian companies accountable in their overseas operations. After years of advocacy from many organizations and activists that highlighted human rights abuses

committed by these companies, the Canadian government created the Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise (CORE). The CORE receives complaints about human rights abuse tied to Canadian corporate activity abroad in the mining, oil, gas, and garment sectors. However, the CORE doesn't have the authority required to do its job effectively, such as forcing companies to produce documents, and compelling witness testimony under oath. While advocates for corporate accountability celebrated the creation of the position, ongoing advocacy is required to ensure that better implementation can take place to address the ongoing problems of a lack of corporate accountability.

As people who call Canada home, there is a place for us to influence every one of these stages!

Which level of government is responsible?

Another important question to consider is which level of government is responsible for the issue we are concerned about. In general, the Federal Government is responsible for issues affecting the entire country like the military, criminal law and foreign affairs. Provincial governments are responsible for prisons, hospitals and education, alongside other regional issues. The powers of municipal governments are granted by the province and are limited to issues of local importance. This is called the division of powers, referring

to the different authority assigned to provincial and federal governments laid out in the constitution. If you aren't sure who is responsible, there is a comprehensive list on the Government of Canada website. Make sure you are talking to the officials who are responsible for the issue you are concerned about. Discussing issues like Canada's weapons exports with your local city councilor may be interesting, but it will not be very effective in creating change!

THE FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

How it works and where **YOU** can make a difference!

AGENDA SETTING

Identify the issue
Raise awareness
Determine a course of action



BILL
Government
Private Sector
Senate



HOUSE
FIRST READING

DURING READINGS
Show support or criticism
Encourage committee study

RESEARCH

Who is impacted by or
already working on this?
Who supports or opposes?

HOUSE
THIRD READING

SENATE

expect some obstacles along the way!

SENATE
FIRST READING

Bills can also be introduced
in the Senate

Bills go through the
same process in the
Senate, and can be
addressed using the
same strategies!

SENATE
SECOND READING

SENATE
COMMITTEE

ROYAL ASSENT



**POLICY
IMPLEMENTATION**

Just because a policy is adopted
doesn't mean the advocacy
process is over!

SENATE
REPORT

Senate bills return to the
House of Commons



4 How can I advocate?

Canadians are blessed to live in a democracy with a vibrant civil society. We have many opportunities and channels to be advocates and to communicate our concerns about and support for certain laws and policies.

There are two main kinds of advocacy: political engagement that involves direct contact with the political system, and public engagement that focuses on influencing public opinion. Both are important for creating change, and as noted in the previous section, public opinion often helps bring an issue to the government's attention.

Below are some of the most common and effective ways that people can do advocacy. Depending on the context, some of these may be more effective than others, but everyone can engage in ways that use their skills and interests. Also remember that in Canada each of us is represented by many elected officials, including our city councilors and mayors, provincial members of parliament (MLAs or MPPs), Senators, and MPs. This section often says 'MP' for simplicity, but you can engage with any of these government representatives and talk to them about the issues that concern you.

- [Sign a petition](#)
- [Write to a politician](#)
- [Meet with your MP](#)
- [Phone your MP](#)
- [Join a political party](#)
- [Write a letter to the editor](#)
- [Offer a public prayer witness](#)
- [Engage in nonviolent direct action](#)

MCC has the privilege of walking with many communities seeking justice.

Though the Interfaith Council on Hydropower, MCC Manitoba works alongside communities facing the impacts of hydro projects in northern Manitoba. One of these individuals is Les Dysart, a multi-generational fisherman from O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (South Indian Lake). In the mid 1970's, his community was forcibly relocated by the Churchill River Diversion (CRD) project of Manitoba Hydro, resulting in serious ecological, economic, and cultural damage.

Water-level fluctuations from this project cause devastation on fish habitats, navigation, and community livelihoods. Based on our relationship, we knew that change was desperately needed. We also knew that politicians needed to hear directly from the people impacted, like Les. Out of this desire to see justice done, MCC used our voice to encourage our connections in Ottawa to listen closely to the experiences of communities impacted by environmental injustice. In part due to this advocacy work, in April 2024 Les Dysart was invited to share his experience, expertise and concerns to the Standing Senate Committee on Energy as they studied a new bill to address environmental racism and environmental justice. This bill ended up becoming law in June 2024.

1. Meet with your elected officials

A face-to-face meeting with your MP (or other elected official) is usually the most effective way not only to advocate, but also to build a relationship. They are more likely to remember you and your message if you meet in person, and you will quickly gain a sense of the MP's views as well. If having a meeting seems daunting, consider going as a group with one or two other individuals to make the experience less intimidating!

Here are some tips for meeting with your MP:

1. Plan ahead and do your research

- Create an outline with talking points
- Consider assigning speaking roles and practice what you want to say
- Look up the MP's profile and voting record

2. Focus on what you know

- Why do you care about this issue?
- Do you have a personal connection to the issue?
- What experience or expertise can you share?

3. Have a clear ask

What would you like the MP to do? Here are some example actions you could ask for:

- Ask a question in the House of Commons
- Sponsor a parliamentary petition
- Pass a motion to study an issue at a committee
- Raise an issue in caucus
- Table a private members bill
- Make a public statement of support, use social media
- Take a pledge
- Speak at an event or press conference
- Provide advice on roadblocks and who to speak with next

4. Follow up a couple weeks later

- Send an email thanking the MP for meeting with you
- Remind them of any action points



2. Call your MP

If you are unable to meet with your MP in person but want to share your view on a particular topic, you can phone their constituency office. Indicate to the MP's staff that you would like to register an opinion and would like it passed on to the MP. Calling is a good method if you like to be prepared, since you can write down notes to help guide you, especially if you are leaving a voicemail.

Make sure that your statement is brief, clear and concise.

Calling an MP is especially helpful when an important decision is about to be made in Parliament—the more phone calls an MP receives on the issue, the better! You can find the phone number for your MP's Parliament Hill office and their constituency office on the House of Commons website.

3. Write a letter to a politician

Letters are a great method because it's an opportunity to articulate why you think an issue is important. If you do not have the time to set up a meeting with an MP or if you feel you can express your ideas more clearly through writing, letters can be a powerful way to communicate a message. This is especially true when MPs receive many letters from many different people or organizations advocating for the same thing.

Here are a few tips:

- **Focus on one topic or issue.**
- **Clearly outline your concerns.**
- **Keep the letter short (ideally 1-2 pages) so that an MP will be sure to read it.**
- **Use a constructive tone. Be critical but polite.**
- **If you have credentials or personal experience that would increase your authority, be sure to list these things.**
- **Consider all the relevant MPs who should receive your letter and share copies with them. If you are writing to the prime minister, send copies to your own MP and to leaders of the opposition parties.**
- **Make sure to include your full mailing address.**
- **Review the letter. Have a friend or family member read it over before you send it.**

Letters sent by mail – particularly when they are hand-written, rather than typed letters – still make a greater impact than those sent by email. Hard copy letters also require no postage if they are addressed to the MP's Parliament Hill office:

Name of Member of Parliament
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada
K1A 0A6

If you choose to send your letter by email, you can find email addresses for all politicians on the Parliament of Canada website (parl.ca).



4. Sign a petition

Petitioning first began in the 18th century and remains a common form of advocacy. Citizens can add their names to a petition that gets presented in the House of Commons, so MPs can see that an issue is important to Canadian voters, particularly if the petition has many signatures.

There are two kinds of petitions, paper or electronic. Politicians appreciate the extra effort that goes into gathering and delivering hand-written signatures on a paper petition. Many MPs see it as their obligation to present in the House of Commons any paper petitions

they receive from constituents, which gets an issue on the public record. Electronic petitions make it quicker and easier to gather signatures in support of a cause. You can find guidelines and templates for both kinds of petitions on the House of Commons website.

Signing a petition may be a fast and relatively easy way to advocate. However, it is not generally as effective in bringing about change as meeting with, writing to, or calling a politician directly. These methods speak more directly to those with decision-making power and can allow for conversation around the issue that you would like to discuss, whereas petitions can sometimes go unnoticed, especially if not very many people have signed them.

5. Get involved with a political party

Joining a political party is an underestimated way you can get involved politically. Becoming a member of a political party allows you to do things like nominate and vote for candidates to run for the party (including the party leader) and help shape party platforms.

If you believe a particular candidate can make a significant difference, consider volunteering for their election campaign. As a campaign volunteer, you can get involved in distributing literature, organizing events, raising money, making phone calls, or simply talking to people about why you think the candidate should be elected. If you are really keen, you may find yourself helping plan your candidate's campaign strategy. Or, if you think that you have the gifts, skills and passion for political life, why not consider running for office yourself?



In April 2012, the Canadian federal government announced an end to funding health care for refugee claimants. A group of students at Canadian Mennonite University, assigned to develop an advocacy action plan for a class assignment, decided to focus their efforts on this issue. After making contact with other groups also working on the issue, the students developed a “59 cent campaign.” They asked Canadians to mail 59 cents – the amount per citizen required to maintain the health coverage – to the prime minister, along with a message to restore the health coverage. Within a few days, their campaign generated 200 media mentions, and 350 people had sent letters with 59 cents. In 2014 a federal court ordered the government to reinstate the original funding. In November 2015 a new government announced the restoration of full funding for refugee health care. The students attributed the success of their campaign to its focus on the value of human life and to how they allied their efforts to larger networks.

6. Write an article or a letter to the editor

Newspapers and media outlets appreciate when citizens weigh in and offer opinions to ensure that citizens have their voice heard. Writing an article, an op-ed or a letter to the editor can be a great way to influence public opinion on a particular issue or add an angle that is not heard in the news.

To increase your chances of getting published, here are some tips:

Check the guidelines for the newspaper or website you are pitching to, as many have specific rules about word length, citations, etc. Make sure you understand the style of writing each publication accepts and think about what format will best convey your ideas.

Don't just offer your own thoughts on an issue. Back up your opinion with evidence.

Make sure that you have done your research and write clearly. Have someone read your piece before you send it off.

7. Organize a public prayer witness

Gathering in a public place with fellow believers who share a common concern can be a profound and meaningful way to create change. Praying, singing, and lamenting in a public space can strengthen and inspire participants in ongoing advocacy. It can also offer a powerful witness to the public, whether to the passersby, the media, or elected officials. A public prayer witness is also a good way to connect advocacy to our faith convictions.

Here are some things to think about:

Gather a group to plan the prayer service. Don't do this alone! Be as inclusive as you can be in pulling together your group. Pray together as you plan your prayer witness.

When choosing a site, consider accessibility, access to public transportation, visibility and symbolic significance. Determine if the site requires a special permit.

Plan the outline for your prayer witness. Include a variety of elements such as candle-lighting, scripture readings, songs, poetry, brief reflections, rituals, and times of silence. Keep the service short, especially if the weather is cold.

Consider creating a short handout that can be distributed to passersby explaining the issue and your goals. Make sure to include contact information.

8. Engage in non-violent direct action

Advocacy is more than speaking out. We can also advocate through our actions, sometimes with few or no words at all. Nonviolent direct action can be a way of drawing attention to and exposing unjust policies and practices through collective and often symbolic action. Some forms of nonviolent direct action include street theatre, marches, strikes, boycotts or sit-ins. Taking time to creatively and publicly unmask violence and injustice — whether as an individual or a group — can be a powerful means of conveying a message.

Acts of public witness and nonviolent direct action, and even civil disobedience have a role in faithful advocacy, but we encourage careful thought and preparation. Acts of civil disobedience (deliberately breaking a law to convey an important message), in particular,

should not be undertaken without spiritual discernment, training, and an awareness of possible consequences. Without adequate preparation, nonviolent action can appear reckless or foolish and may actually harm your advocacy goals.

Here are some tips to take into consideration as you prepare to do direct action, in whatever form that may take:

Think about place and permissions. Consider where your event or action is being held. Is it on private or public property? In a busy or not busy place? No matter where your action is, make sure to notify people like the police, security, or a manager before showing up. Find out if you require a permit or police escort for your event.

Choose dynamic speakers. Effective speakers are central to most action events. Who are the voices that people respect and can learn from? Academics? Community activists? People impacted the issue? Politicians?

Consider logistics, such as what agenda you will follow, what equipment you might need (megaphone, signs, etc.) and transportation needs.

Plan for any disruptions you might face, consider training designated participants in non-violent de-escalation and conflict resolution techniques in case you face opposition.

Get the word out! It depends on your action, but likely the more people you have involved the more impact you will have. Think about how you will get people to join you, and where you will spread the news, through social media, at your church or school?

We believe that the core of peaceful advocacy is bringing people together to create change, and one great way to do that is over food! Creativity and baking are both part of MCC's advocacy history, from the 1980s to 2024. In 1989, MCC arranged a meeting in the MCC office in East Jerusalem between Joe Clark, then the Conservative foreign minister, and Palestinian leaders. Over an MCC-baked cake and after hearing from Palestinian leaders, Canada decided to change its policy to recognize the Palestinian right to self-determination. In the same spirit, in 2024 MCC supporters in southern Ontario baked treats for their MPs and provincial MPPs, in part of what they called their 'buns not bombs' campaign. Advocacy often involves a lot of meetings and emails, but that doesn't have to make it boring! There is space for creativity and fresh ideas (and baked goods!).

Tips for difficult conversations:

Whatever form of advocacy you choose, whether public or political, you will probably end up in some uncomfortable, tense, or just awkward conversations with someone who disagrees with you. No matter the context, here are a few tips for engaging in these hard conversations.

1. Find Common Ground

Sometimes, our desire for harmony can prevent us from speaking up against injustice. But disagreement doesn't have to disrupt the peace. There are healthy ways of engaging in conflict while focusing on what we share, rather than where we disagree:

- Use non-aggressive responses like, “I see where you’re coming from, but that hasn’t been my experience” or “I think we both feel... but I differ in...”
- Be mindful of the three zones people fall in when learning new information (comfort, learning, panic) and avoid overwhelming someone.
- Use the language of values: “I value... which shapes my view on this.”
- Be generous with yourself (and others). Giving ourselves permission to have internal contradictions will make us more generous when we see them in others.

2. Do the prep work

Hard conversations require an understanding of both our own and others’ views.

- Avoid confirmation bias by seeking balanced perspectives. Resist the urge to confirm your opinion by only looking for facts to strengthen your viewpoint.
- Listen to stories from a variety of people affected by an issue for a fuller picture.
- Keep learning and follow issues that matter to you.

- Focus on the end goals of a policy or change, and ask open, curious questions.
- Practice discussions with trusted people before engaging with others.

3. Identify bias

Our minds are naturally biased, which affects how we see information. Awareness of our biases can help us listen with openness and curiosity.

- Try to identify the values that motivate others—family, dignity, honesty, for example—and how they shape their views.
- Notice if your own bias has ever led you to discredit someone simply because you didn’t like what they had to say.
- Add nuance to polarized topics by highlighting the humanity of every person or group involved. When a situation is oversimplified, it is easier to find polarized sides. Bring in narratives that highlight the people involved as humane, relatable neighbours created in the image of God.

4. Listen well

Good listening builds trust and is perhaps the most fundamental skill for having a respectful dialogue on divisive issues.

- Confirm your understanding by paraphrasing back what you hear.
- Focus on listening to the other person to truly understand them, not to prepare your next argument in response.
- Stay critical of sources and sensationalized stories. Widen your lens by asking:
 - What is oversimplified about this issue?
 - What do you want the other side to understand about you?
 - What would it feel like if this problem was solved?, and What’s the question nobody is asking?

5 What does the Bible say about advocacy?

There are many stories of advocates in the Bible, such as Joseph, Nehemiah, and Esther. These stories tell us explicitly about the biblical value of advocating for those facing injustice, but many other parts of the bible also inform our faith-based approach to advocacy.

The Bible calls us to:

Speak out against injustice. For centuries Christians have been inspired by the biblical call to “speak out, judge righteously, [and] defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:9). We can stand in solidarity with communities seeking justice, peace and human dignity by calling on the government for better policies and laws.

Act with integrity. We know that words and actions go together, and our actions give integrity to our words (James 2:14-17). Seeking truth and acting with generosity and kindness towards everyone we encounter in our advocacy gives weight to our asks. Seeking peace and justice starts with our own relationships!

Respect everyone. We are called to treat all people with respect, as each person is worthy of dignity, including everyone in the political system. In advocacy work it is important to treat everyone as we would wish to be treated (Matthew 7:12), whether we agree with them or not.

Act with humility. We seek to be humble in our witness to government, remembering Paul’s words to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). Although we try to listen carefully, do our research, and get our facts right, we recognize there are times when we don’t have all the information, or the wisdom needed to speak.

Lament. Even though we may consider ourselves advocates for social justice, sometimes when we listen well and are honest with ourselves, we realize that we – as individuals, as an organization, as a church – may be part of the problem, rather than the solution. At times, we can only confess, weep and lament.

Hope. As people of faith, our advocacy rests on the hope that God’s justice and peace will ultimately prevail (Isaiah 2:1-5, Luke 4:18-19). There are many disappointments in advocacy work. As much as we hope for the success of a change in policy, or an amendment to a bill, the results often fall short of our goals. Despite setbacks, we carry on, trusting that God’s vision of justice will be realized.



Appendices: Helpful terms

Bill: A piece of legislation presented in Parliament. When it is given Royal Assent by the Governor General it becomes law.

Bureaucrats: Employees of the government who are directly concerned with shaping or implementing policy or delivering a program.

Cabinet Ministers: Politicians appointed by the prime minister to be the head of a specific department.

Civil Society: Citizen groups sharing a common goal and not run by any government body. Examples include non-profit organizations, church groups, unions, etc.

House of Commons: Also known as the lower house, the House of Commons is a primary decision-making body of the Canadian government and is comprised of elected members of Parliament. This is where bills are presented, debated and voted on.

Member of Parliament (MP): A person who is elected by their community to represent them in the House of Commons. Provincial officials can be known as an MPP (member of provincial parliament) or MLA (member of legislative assembly).

Official Opposition: The party in the House of Commons with the second highest number of elected representatives or “seats.”

Its primary role is to hold the government accountable.

Policy: A broader decision made by government officials that does not necessarily get voted on in Parliament but represents a direction or shapes government programming.

Prime Minister: The prime minister is the leader of the party with the highest number of seats in the House of Commons.

Senate: Known as the upper house of Parliament, representatives in the Senate are appointed and not elected. The purpose of the Senate is to offer “sober second thought” to the House of Commons by also doing things such as studying bills and voting on them. Senators rarely vote down bills, but they do suggest amendments. Occasionally, bills will originate in the Senate.

Standing Committee: When a bill or issue needs closer analysis, it is referred to a specific committee which will study it in depth, call on witnesses with relevant expertise or experience and make recommendations for amendments. Committees may also initiate studies in particular topics on behalf of Parliament. Each committee has representation from the main political parties in proportion to their representation in the House of Commons.



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