MCC Canada Advocacy Toolkit

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Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Canada is the relief, development and peace agency of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches of Canada. MCC Canada engages in advocacy to government to support its mission of responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice. We are registered as an in-house lobbyist organization with the Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying of Canada and must comply with the Lobbyists’ Code of Conduct.

Much of MCC Canada’s advocacy happens through our Ottawa Office, established in 1975. Our Ottawa Office speaks to government and engages supporters on issues of concern to MCC and to our partners. Learn more about our work by contacting us:

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Have you ever…

- Stood up for someone who was bullied or harassed?
- Pushed the medical system to get treatment for a sick friend or relative?
- Participated in a public protest against something you felt was harming people?
- Signed a petition on an issue of concern?

Then you are an advocate!

Perhaps you have not thought about yourself as an advocate before. No doubt you have been concerned about people whose lives have been harmed by poverty, crime, war or injustice. No doubt you have donated money to help address specific needs. Perhaps you have volunteered in a thrift shop or a community project. These are important ways of addressing human need.

This resource is intended to encourage you to address some of the deeper causes of human suffering by becoming an advocate.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has engaged in formal advocacy to the federal government for over forty years. This work has involved making direct appeals to government for policies that would, for example, increase aid to disaster victims, welcome and resettle refugees, apply restorative justice principles to crime, and seek nonviolent solutions to armed conflict.

Much of this work has involved MCC workers speaking to elected officials or civil servants through face to face meetings, letters or briefs, and written submissions to parliamentary committees.

Increasingly, however, we are learning about the power and influence of ordinary individuals and communities in the work of advocacy. Indeed, most members of Parliament today are much more eager to hear from their constituents on particular issues than they are from organizations like MCC.

Ordinary people like you can help build peace, justice and human dignity through advocacy. Join us!

This resource invites you to become an advocate, and to practice advocacy in the same way that you donate to a cause, volunteer in your community or engage in direct service.
What is advocacy?

There are many ways to define advocacy. A very simple definition is: speaking on behalf of another. A more sophisticated definition describes advocacy as: a set of organized actions aimed at influencing and/or changing the behaviours, policies, and resource allocation of individuals or institutions that hold power, for the betterment of people affected by an issue.¹

However you define it, advocacy has to do with influencing people, structures, and systems to bring about change. Very often, advocacy involves speaking to government, either at a municipal, provincial or federal level. This is how MCC generally understands and practices advocacy. But advocacy can also be aimed at shifting the attitudes, policies and practices of churches, schools, corporations or society as a whole.

Advocacy is about unmasking the structural and systemic causes of poverty, violence, injustice and human indignity, and seeking to address them. It often emerges out of deep relationships with those who suffer injustice, and a commitment to amplifying their voice. For MCC, advocacy is rooted in the biblical call to seek justice for the oppressed.

This focus on addressing systemic or root causes can help us distinguish advocacy from other forms of assistance. For example, you are doing direct service, if you:

- Sew blankets or assemble relief kits for MCC;
- Participate in an MCC community project such as prison visitation;
- Volunteer in a soup kitchen or food bank.

But you are engaged if 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.

At the MCC Ottawa Office, we see advocacy as a tool for furthering our work of humanitarian assistance, community development and peacebuilding. We use advocacy to address government policies and practices that harm people, and we offer proposals for 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.

We see advocacy as being a two-sided coin:
- Political engagement—This is the direct engagement we do with parliamentarians and civil servants through personal meetings, written letters, submissions to committees, etc.
- Public engagement—This is the work we do among our constituents and supporters to build awareness about particular issues and to encourage them to engage in advocacy.

Advocacy takes many forms. It can be as simple as writing a letter to your member of Parliament in the privacy of your home. Or it can be as complex as a highly organized campaign involving many people, numerous 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.

If you need to be convinced why advocacy is important, go to Section 6. If you are already convinced you want to become engaged, simply read on.

“We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

FOR OVER A DECADE, people in many parts of the world have been raising their voice about the practices of Canadian mining companies operating in their communities. They point to human rights violations, environmental destruction, social and economic upheaval, and disregard for the wishes of local communities. Faith-based and civil society groups have been advocating for accountability for mining companies, which frequently operate with impunity. In 2014 the federal government, which had been resisting anything but weak and voluntary mechanisms, finally took steps to implement mandatory reporting for Canadian mining companies. From now on, mining companies would be required to report publicly any payments made to host governments for mining concessions. The story is far from over, but it does demonstrate that the concerted effort of Canadians from many sectors of society has achieved a measure of accountability that has not existed before.
Chances are, you opened up this Toolkit because you’re fired up about a particular issue. You want to do something. That is great! But before you get started, take time to reflect and prepare. We suggest you consider the following steps — not necessarily in the order given — to help you get ready.

Listen to the people. Ultimately, advocacy is 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 counsel. If it’s you who is directly affected, talk to others around you who might be affected.

Do your research. Make sure that you know the issue well. Talk to others. Read about the issue carefully and critically. Expose yourself to different viewpoints. Look to reputable organizations and institutions for analysis and reflection. Get the best information you can.

Learn the system. Make sure you understand the political, economic, or social systems that can be used to make change. See the next section in this Toolkit for some basics on parliamentary government and the legislative process. Understand how to act strategically within those systems.

Work with others. It is fine to advocate on your own, but it is even better to do it with others. Gather a group of people that shares your concerns and seeks to act on them. Discern together what you are hoping to achieve. Share responsibilities.

Pray. If you are a person (or people) of faith, spend time in prayer, seeking divine wisdom and guidance as you accompany those who are asking for advocacy. Pray for strength, courage and perseverance to face disappointment and discouragement and to persist for the long haul. Consider embracing a “spirituality” of advocacy. See Section 7.

Plan carefully. 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 the resistance you may encounter.

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. Ask yourselves how you might personally address the privileges, prejudices and policies that stand in the way of the flourishing of others. Listen again to the people affected.

We are not ‘a voice for the voiceless;’ we lend our privilege as a megaphone.

Samantha Baker Evens

If you want to go fast, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together.

African proverb

IN THE LATE 1980s several people at Stirling Avenue Mennonite church in Kitchener, Ontario came together to form a peace and justice working group. They were energized by movements calling for nuclear disarmament, for an end to wars in Latin America, and for a stop to low-level flying by NATO fighter jets over Innu lands in Labrador. They felt their Christian faith called them to actively witness for peace and justice in these contexts. They received support from the congregation in the way of space for a small Peace and Justice Centre and a part-time staff position. Along with an “inner journey” of prayer and spiritual discernment, the group pursued an “outer journey” of advocacy, education and public witness. They held workshops and seminars, organized vigils and prayer services, signed petitions and wrote letters to government officials. A quarter century later, the group continues to exist, but the ministry of peace and justice witness is more integrated with the life of the congregation as a whole. In more recent years, the members of Stirling Avenue have advocated on behalf of refugee claimants, a sister church in Colombia threatened by resource extraction, and low income people needing housing. According to Josie Winterfeld, Missions, Peace & Justice worker at Stirling, the ministry of peace and justice is core to the congregation’s identity and advocacy is an important part of that.
Within the Government of Canada, policy decisions are made in many ways. On a daily basis, civil servants make decisions about how to deliver programs, how to fund them, and how to regulate their operations. Sometimes policies and programs are shaped by high-ranking officials in the public service, including those working within the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO). Sometimes, they are shaped by elected parliamentarians and ministers who are in a position to influence law. At another level, each political party also develops a platform through which they articulate their general policy perspectives on major issues.

The point is, there are many ways in which policy is developed. We encourage you to become engaged, whether the issue that concerns you is one determined by civil servants, high-level bureaucrats, or elected officials.

One of the most obvious channels through which to weigh-in on an issue of concern is through the legislative process. In order to advocate effectively, it is important to know how this process works. This knowledge will help you determine how and when to intervene, as well as what strategies might get your voice heard. The information provided below on the legislative process is specific to the federal government, but much of it can be applied at the provincial level as well.

The Federal Legislative Process

To put it simply, Canadian Parliament makes laws that govern life in Canada. Sometimes these laws are harmful to particular people or communities, and should be amended. Other times, the development of new laws is required. We advocate to influence the legislative process and try to bring about just laws that benefit all.

Before any act becomes law, it is known as a bill or legislation. Bills are introduced in Parliament either as government bills—put forward by a member of Cabinet—or private members’ bills—put forward by backbench MPs from any party in the House of Commons. Although bills are most commonly introduced in the House of Commons, they can also originate in the Senate.

As soon as a bill or piece of legislation is introduced or “tabled” in either House, it is published on the Parliament of Canada website. It then goes through a long and arduous process before becoming law. The website allows you to monitor the journey of a bill through the legislative process, so you can determine when and how to intervene.

What journey does a bill make?

A bill goes through readings in both the House of Commons and the Senate where it is studied, debated and voted on, before the Governor General (the Queen’s representative in Canada) can give it Royal Assent to become law.

First Reading: The bill is simply introduced or “tabled” in Parliament.
Second Reading: The bill is debated in principle and may be sent to committee for study.
Committee stage: The bill is closely scrutinized by the committee. Witnesses are called to testify and amendments may be proposed.
Third reading/report stage: The bill is sent back to the House with any proposed amendments and these amendments are voted on by MPs.

After three readings in the House, the legislation then goes on to the Senate — sometimes known as the “chamber of sober second thought” — and journeys through precisely the same process.

Where and when can you advocate?

There are many ways to get involved during the legislative process between first and third reading. Each stage provides different opportunities to raise your voice on what you see as the strengths or weaknesses of any piece of legislation.

Do your homework and know your audience...

Make sure you read a bill carefully and do any necessary additional research to ensure that your advocacy is well-informed. Make sure to talk with the people who are most invested in, or affected by, the legislation. For example, if you are advocating for the rights of refugees in Canada, be sure to consult with people from the refugee community. This will help you gain important insights into the legislation. Likely, it will also offer a personal reward.
IN 2011 NONVIOLENT DEMONSTRATIONS against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad began in Syria as part of what was referred to as “Arab spring.” By the end of the year the situation had turned to war, with many international players helping to support either the regime or one or more of the opposition groups. By early 2015 over 200,000 people had been killed and millions displaced. Because of MCC’s longstanding relationships with Syrian partners, MCC workers based in Lebanon visited Ottawa in the fall of 2013 and again in 2014 to encourage Canada to increase its humanitarian assistance and to support local groups working within Syria and neighbouring countries to build peace across ethnic and religious lines. MCC staff in Canada reiterated this request to a parliamentary committee studying the conflict in Syria. In late 2014, the Government of Canada provided a major funding grant for an MCC peacebuilding project in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

Find out whether the bill that concerns you is a government bill or a private member’s bill. When the ruling party holds the majority of seats in the House of Commons, government bills tend to pass. On the other hand, in a majority context a private member’s bill — introduced by a backbench MP from any party in the House — can have much more difficulty passing (unless it is sponsored by an MP within the governing party!). A private member’s bill is still worth speaking to, however, as it provides a great opportunity for building awareness about a particular issue regardless even if it doesn’t become law (see side panel).

Determine who your audience will be by identifying the MPs and ministers most responsible for the bill. Frequently, cabinet ministers with specific government portfolios — e.g. foreign affairs, refugees and immigration, defence, Indigenous affairs, etc. — are responsible for pieces of legislation relevant to their work. Your audience should also include the relevant “critics” from the opposition parties; their job is to hold the elected official to account, so they are also keen to hear whether Canadians support a bill or not. And don’t forget to include your own MP; it is always important to communicate with him or her.

Regardless of whether the bill is a government or private member’s bill, it is important to stay in touch with its sponsor(s) and supporters, as well as it opponents, and to be familiar with arguments on all sides. If you are not sure where an MP stands on an issue, check their party platform or voting record on bills and motions in the past.

First and second reading…
Once a bill is introduced at first reading, you can already start showing your support or concern by writing to MPs or sending in petitions to outline your perspective. When a bill receives second reading, you can encourage the government to send it to committee for proper study.

Committee stage…
The committee stage is when the most substantive consideration is given to its contents, so it’s a unique opportunity to provide input.

During committee stage, a group of MPs studies the bill. They listen to the testimony of witnesses who have a particular stake or expertise in the issue. After the study is complete, the committee writes a report, outlining its observations and recommending potential amendments. The composition of these committees is proportional to the composition of the House of Commons. This means that the party in power will have the highest number of members on any given committee, and so has more influence on who is able to testify and what amendments move ahead. While only individuals who are specifically invited by the committee may testify in-person, any citizen can send in a written submission!

If you think that you have particular expertise to contribute to the policy discussion, you, your group or your organization should consider submitting a brief to the committee.
Public policy advocacy is a particular type of peacebuilding. Advocacy is a way to give non-violent voice to messages from citizens to their government about the rules that affect people’s lives.

Stu Clark and Sophia Murphy

Make sure to follow the guidelines closely to increase the likelihood of your submission being read and included in the committee’s decision.

Even if you don’t submit anything to the committee, be sure to monitor the committee hearings online and read the final report. Not only will you hear analysis and learn about the interests of MPs on the committee, but you may gain insight into what amendments—if any—are likely to be accepted.

Third reading…
Once the bill goes back to the House of Commons for third reading, you still have the opportunity to weigh in, because this is when MPs will vote on any proposed amendments. Are there amendments proposed? Do you support them? Do they strengthen or weaken the bill? Write to MPs, letting them know what you think they should consider as they prepare to vote on amendments and third reading of the bill.

Again, once a bill successfully completes three readings in the House of Commons, it moves on to the Senate for the exact same process. While senators are not elected officials, they are still charged with ensuring legislation is made effectively! You can also write to senators in the upper house to offer your opinion on the legislation.

In short, if your issue involves a piece of legislation, think about what kind of legislation it is, who the stakeholders are (MPs and civil society alike), and where you could get involved in the legislative process.

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“The way to right wrongs is, first, to turn the light of truth upon them.”

Ida B. Wells
Political Engagement Map

Critique or support an existing bill/motion

Do your homework: Research the issue
Who does it impact?
Why is it important?

Propose a new idea (bill/motion/policy)

Find like-minded individuals or groups that support your idea (churches, neighbours, NGOs, civil servants)

What should happen to it?
Support it? Why?
Propose amendments? What are they? Why?
Scrap it? Why?

Is it a...
Private Member’s Bill?
Government Bill?

Who sponsored the Bill?
Who supports it? Who opposes it?

Determine who in government to approach
Is there an MP interested in or knowledgeable of your issue? Can you meet with your own MP?

Determine your action strategy
Write to the committee studying the bill
Meet with or call an MP
Write to an MP
Start a petition
Engage in direct action (i.e. prayer vigils, protests)
Write to your newspaper
Use social media to educate the public
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. Below are some examples of how you can get involved.

At the MCC Ottawa Office, we consider advocacy to be a two-sided coin: with political engagement on one side and public engagement on the other. Political engagement involves direct engagement with the political system, and public engagement focuses on influencing public opinion. We include examples of each.

While not an exhaustive list, these are some of the most common, and arguably most effective, ways that ordinary people can do advocacy.

Political Engagement
- Sign a petition
- Write to a politician
- Meet with your MP
- Phone your MP
- Join a political party

Public Engagement
- Prepare an “elevator speech”
- Write a letter to the editor
- Engage with social media
- Send out a press release
- Offer a public prayer witness
- Engage in nonviolent direct action

This is a time for a loud voice, open speech, and fearless thinking. I rejoice that I live in such a splendidly disturbing time.

Helen Keller

Political Engagement

1. Sign a petition

While petitioning first began back in the 18th century, signing a paper petition is still a common form of advocacy today in the 21st century. When citizens add their names to a petition that gets presented in the House of Commons, MPs can see that an issue is important to Canadian voters (particularly if the petition has many signatures!). Many MPs see it as their obligation to present any paper petition they receive from constituents in the House of Commons—this gets an issue on the public record! Politicians appreciate the extra effort that goes into gathering and delivering hand-written signatures.

In recent years, electronic petitions have exploded onto the scene, making it quicker and easier to gather signatures in support of a cause. In November 2015, it became possible to create, sign and send electronic petitions to the House of Commons on the Parliament of Canada website.

Want to start a petition? Whether you circulate a paper or electronic petition, make sure that you follow the precise guidelines outlined on the website. Paper petitions, for example, should have a minimum of 25 signatures. Electronic petitions need to be supported by five individuals and sponsored by an MP, before they are made available for signing. See a sample petition in the Appendices.

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

Letters are a very helpful means of political engagement because they let you make the case for why you think an issue is important. Make sure you are concise. For instance, even if respecting the treaty rights of Indigenous peoples may warrant a 30-page explanation, for instance, such a lengthy tome will not get read. When writing a letter to a politician, “short and sweet” should be your motto.

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 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.

See the Appendices for a sample letter.

Like paper petitions, letters sent by mail—particularly when they are hand-written, rather than typed form letters—still make a greater impact than those sent by email. Hard copy letters also require no postage if they are sent to this address:

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

If you choose to send your letter by email, you can find email addresses for all politicians here: http://www.parl.gc.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members

Speaking with an MP is usually more effective in being heard than writing a letter. However, 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 powerful in communicating a message. This is especially true when MPs receive many letters from many different people or organizations advocating for the same thing.

3. Meet with your MP

Believe it or not, MPs don’t spend all of their time in Ottawa. In fact, many weeks are set aside in the Parliamentary Calendar for them to spend time in their ridings and meet with their constituents. A face-to-face meeting with your MP is usually the most effective way not only to advocate, but to build a relationship. They are more likely to remember you and your message if you meet in person; moreover, you will quickly gain a sense of the MP’s own views.

However, meeting with an MP does require more time and effort in preparation and delivery than other advocacy methods. Making a good impression, communicating effectively, and coming prepared will open up the door for further advocacy efforts. Going as a group, with one or two other individuals, can make the experience less intimidating and also lend weight to the issue you are concerned about.

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**story**

**IN 1981** Titus and Linda Gehman Peachey were serving with MCC in Laos. One day Linda met a farmer whose wife had been killed the previous day as she hoed in the family farm. The mother of 11 was killed instantly by a small cluster munition which had been dropped by U.S. military forces years earlier but had not detonated. The husband asked Linda to take the damaged hoe head back to the U.S. to show people what American weapons were responsible for. Titus Peachey began a lifelong journey to work for a ban on the manufacture, distribution and use of cluster munitions. Thanks to the collaborative efforts of hundreds of campaigners around the world, such an international ban came into being in 2008.

The Canadian government, although a signatory to the treaty which created the ban, was reluctant to ratify the treaty for several years. Moreover, when it did present a ratifying bill in 2011, that bill was weak and filled with loopholes, allowing for the continued use of cluster munitions in certain circumstances. MCC Canada, together with a coalition of other groups, advocated hard for strengthened legislation. A small victory was achieved in 2014 when the legislation was amended somewhat before the bill passed into law in 2015.
Here are some tips for meeting with your MP:

**Before the meeting**
- **Contact your MP.** Call the MP’s office ahead of time to set up a meeting. Be ready with times that you are free to meet. Be flexible.
- **Prepare your argument.** Do your research, prepare questions, and understand the MP’s stance on the issue.
- **Develop a short brief.** Write a 1-2 page brief that identifies who you are, what you are asking the MP to do, and why you are asking it. You will leave this with the MP.
- **Determine who will do what.** If you are visiting your MP in a group, decide in advance who will take charge of presenting your concerns and what the responsibilities of each group member will be.
- **Plan to keep your pitch short.** MPs are busy, and you may only have 15 minutes for your meeting. Decide beforehand what the crucial information is you want the MP to take away.

**At the meeting**
- **Be on time and dress respectably.** Although you have a democratic right to dress as you wish, wearing “business casual” will eliminate any unnecessary distractions that may discredit what you have to say.
- **Focus on only one or two issues.** Although you may have lots of issues to discuss, focus on only one or two, giving precise and clear arguments for your perspective. This will enable you to get your point across, and provide clarity for your MP as to what they can do for you.
- **Share a personal story.** A story or personal experience can lend weight to your arguments.
- **Don’t hesitate to ask kindly for clarification.** MPs don’t always give straight answers, or you may find their arguments unclear. It’s okay to ask for clarity as long as you ask in a respectful tone.
- **Ask what you can do.** Sometimes, if an MP is particularly passionate about an issue or knows someone who is, they can give you resources or suggestions of how best to advocate. So don’t just tell them what they should do; ask them their opinion on what you can do to carry your concern forward.
- **Ask for a response.** If you have made a specific request of your MP, indicate that you would like to hear from them or their staff in the near future.
- **Keep it short.** MPs are busy people, and if you go overtime an assistant will quickly usher you to the door. Keep it short. Keep it sweet.

**Story**

FOR OVER A DECADE, people in many parts of the world have been raising their voice about the practices of Canadian mining companies operating in their communities. They point to human rights violations, environmental destruction, social and economic upheaval, and disregard for the wishes of local communities. Faith-based and civil society groups have been advocating for accountability for mining companies, which frequently operate with impunity. In 2014 the federal government, which had been resisting anything but weak and voluntary mechanisms, finally took steps to implement mandatory reporting for Canadian mining companies. From now on, mining companies would be required to report publicly any payments made to host governments for mining concessions. The story is far from over, but it does demonstrate that the concerted effort of Canadians from many sectors of society has achieved a measure of accountability that has not existed before.

“I cannot change the world but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.”

Mother Teresa
After the meeting

- Make sure to follow up. Again, MPs are busy people. Be sure to send them an email or call them to thank them for their time. In the future, keep them up to date on what you’re doing about the issue, and remind them of what they may have promised to do.

4. Phone your MP

If you are not prepared to meet with your MP but want to share your view on a particular topic, phone their constituency office. Indicate that you would like to register an opinion and would like it passed on to the MP. An assistant will take your name, contact information, and write up a brief summary of your comments to share with the MP. Make sure that your statement is brief, clear and concise. A phone call does not allow for the building of a relationship, but it is still a very effective method of engaging directly with a decision-maker.

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! Indeed, if you are calling just prior to a vote in the House of Commons, you should call the MP’s office on Parliament Hill.

You can find phone numbers for your MP’s constituent office and their Parliament Hill office here: http://www.parl.gc.ca/parliamentarians/en/members

5. Join a political party

Joining a political party is one of the more underestimated ways you can get involved politically. Becoming a card-carrying member of a political party allows you to do things like vote for and nominate 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 your 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?

Here are links to the core beliefs, policies, and platforms of the main federal political parties.

- Bloc Québécois
- Conservative Party of Canada
- Green Party of Canada
- Liberal Party of Canada
- New Democratic Party of Canada

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Do your little bit of good where you are; it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

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story

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 some 350 persons 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 the way they allied their efforts to larger networks.
Public Engagement

6. Prepare an “elevator speech”

An “elevator speech” is a short succinct way of talking about your issue to get others on board. The name comes from the idea that you should be able to get someone interested in your cause in less time than a normal journey on an elevator. Your elevator speech should explain the problem, what needs to change and why, and how ordinary people can support that change. Practice your speech with friends before you try it out on others. Be prepared to speak clearly in more depth if you are given the opportunity.

7. Write a letter to the editor or an article

In a democracy, the purpose of the press is to hold the government accountable by being the “eyes and ears” of the people. Newspapers and media outlets appreciate when citizens weigh-in and offer opinions to ensure their work is factually accurate and that citizens have their voice heard. Writing a letter to the editor can be a great way to influence public opinion on a particular issue. To increase your chances of getting published, here are some tips for writing a good letter to the editor. Make sure your letter:

- Responds to an article and does not just offer an opinion;
- Follows the paper’s guidelines for letters;
- Is short, clear, concise, and thought-provoking. The rule of thumb is 150-300 words maximum.

If you wish to raise a concern about an issue that has not been addressed by the media previously, consider writing an article or opinion piece. Check your newspaper’s guidelines for unsolicited writing. Make sure that you have done your research, know your subject very well, and write clearly. Make sure to have someone read your piece before you send it off.

8. Send out a press release

Are you planning a public engagement event or wanting to highlight the important work your group is doing? A press release is a very effective way of getting the word out. The main purpose of a press release is to convince media outlets that what you have to say is newsworthy. Here are some tips for writing an outstanding press release:

- Write a catchy headline. For example: “Peace is power: Hill Times crowns MCC Ottawa as most influential lobbying organization in Canada.” Imagine you have 10 seconds to convince a reporter to look further into your story. The title is likely the first thing they read. Do make sure, though, that your title is not misleading or false (like the one above), or you will quickly lose credibility.

- Communicate the main points. Be concise and convincing that your story is relevant. It’s not uncommon for reporters to take things verbatim from your press release and put them into their articles. Therefore, include all of the things you would want people to know (who, what, when, where, why, and how) and communicate them clearly. The goal is to catch the reporter’s eye and make drawing from your piece as easy as possible.

- Include quotations. Include an insightful quotation from someone — even yourself — about the purpose of your event or project. This gives your piece a personal touch and lures the reporter into your story. Reporters, especially from local newspapers, also appreciate when you put a local twist on your press release.

Relentless incrementalism consists of strings of reforms, seemingly small and discrete when made, that accumulate to become more than the sum of their parts. Relentless incrementalism is purposeful and patterned, not haphazard and unintended. The drip drip drip of individual changes over time carve substantial and planned shifts in the structure and objectives of public policy.

Ken Battle
Provide extra resources. Make sure that you make the reporter’s research as easy as possible by attaching a link to your event page or any other literature or websites relevant to your cause. Add a good photo with a caption.

Look for allies. Pay attention to what topics reporters cover, targeting the people you know have worked on the issue you are concerned about. For example, if you’re advocating on refugee issues, look for articles on the topic and see who wrote them. Send your press release to those people. They will be more likely to take a closer look.

Be selective. If you send reporters lots of information about many topics, especially topics they are not interested in, your emails will quickly turn into “white noise.” On the other hand, if particular reporters are used to getting a good story when they hear from you, they’ll pay closer attention when you do get in touch.

See the Appendices for a sample press release.

9. Use social media

In our electronically connected world, social media has become a powerful tool for creating social change. The MCC Ottawa Office uses Facebook, Twitter, and a weekly blog to engage our supporters, and has found these tools to be very effective in reaching a broad audience. Like anything else, however, there are more and less effective ways to use social media.

In this day and age, using social media effectively requires savvy. People are employed full-time to manage social media platforms for companies, organizations and governments, and they are experts at knowing how to reach the public. So how do ordinary individuals make their voices heard through all of the noise of the internet? It is possible, but it takes practice and dedication.

Here are some pointers to start you off.

Don’t use social media to replace other forms of advocacy. Ideally, social media should be used to enhance, rather than replace, traditional or face-to-face forms of advocacy. For example, using a Facebook event to organize a march, or writing a blog to update the public on the advocacy efforts of your group, are effective uses of social media to propel your advocacy efforts. On the other hand, using Twitter to vent your frustration with politicians without more personal contact is not as effective.

Choose only a few platforms and do them well. Remember, using social media is a skill that needs to be honed. Start with a commonly used platform like Facebook, Twitter, a blog, or a website and make one of them the central hub that all of your other social media platforms link to. Pay close attention to how other individuals or groups use these platforms as advocacy tools by visiting their pages; find out what “works” for them by measuring Likes, Shares and re-Tweets. Follow those who have similar advocacy agendas so you can plug into a like-minded community and collaborate on important shared concerns.
Know your goals and exercise caution. There are plenty of issues to get excited about. However, if you advocate for all of them on social media your voice will become watered down and people will begin to ignore you. Don’t share every article that you like. Moreover, think carefully about what you share and how you share it so that your opinions will gain respect and carry weight. If you post articles that are not credible or offer distasteful comments, people will likely keep on scrolling the next time they see your post. You may also be upset by the injustice that occurs around a particular situation. Although it is perfectly okay to feel that way, using social media as an outlet for your emotions is a big deterrent for many readers. Your posts should be thought-provoking, but keep them professional and respectful.

Reach your intended audience. Knowing your audience can be difficult on social media. Messages sent into the worldwide web are accessible to virtually anybody and is therefore difficult to know exactly who your message is reaching. Different platforms can be used to access different groups or individuals. Here are some tips for advocating using specific social media tools and for getting your message across to your intended audience.

Facebook:
- Use an organizational Facebook account, as opposed to a personal account which will connect you to your friends and family.
- Use Facebook groups and events to connect like-minded people, create an open forum for discussion or attract more people to a public event.
- Ask your Facebook friends to share your content on their website, blog, Facebook page or other social media accounts.
- Include links and original photos in your Facebook status to increase the chance people will read them.

Twitter:
- Follow Twitter accounts that align with your advocacy efforts. This way you get to know the people that may follow you back or retweet you, expanding the audience that will see your message.
- Tweet directly to a politician, an MP or whoever you would like to hear your advocacy efforts.
- Tweet directly to groups or individuals you wish to partner with in your advocacy efforts.

Using Hashtags:
- Use hashtags to gain interest from the general public by attracting those who share similar interests. They can be used on a variety of platforms including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.
- Use hashtags that are already well used by other users. Creating original hashtags is not likely to relay your message to a wide audience.
- Don’t overdo it: Tweets with hashtags have been found to receive twice as much engagement than those without; however, those with more than two hashtags actually showed a 17 per cent drop in engagement. And let’s face it, nobody wants to read this: #Hashtags are essential #to most tweets #but too many #make #tweets #unreadable, especially to #newbies. Why complicate it? #TwitterTips
10. **Offer 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 passersby, the media, or elected officials. A public prayer witness or vigil also refutes a common perception that faith has nothing to do with political engagement. 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.
- Choose a site, considering accessibility 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, litanies, scripture readings, songs, poetry, brief reflections, rituals, and moments of silence. Keep the service short, especially if the weather is cold.
- Create a brief and concise leaflet that can be distributed to passersby. Make sure to include contact information.
- Notify the media if you wish to draw that kind of attention. Send a brief press release to media outlets several days in advance and again the morning of your event.
- Delegate responsibilities to specific individuals: worship leader, song leader, speaker(s), media spokesperson, photographer, sound person, etc.
- Anticipate disruptions of your prayer witness. Ensure that a few people — ideally with training or experience — are present to manage conflicts with or disruptions from people who resist your message.

Contact MCC’s Ottawa Office for ideas on developing a public peace witness or witness walk.

11. **Do nonviolent 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 is 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 publically unmask violence and injustice — whether as an individual or a group — can be a powerful means of conveying a message.

Stories of nonviolent direct action (see story about Pan y Paz) inspire us to take action. The MCC Ottawa Office affirm acts of public witness and nonviolent direct action, and yes, even civil disobedience, but we encourage people to prepare carefully. 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 may can appear reckless or foolish. (see *Story* on page 5.9).

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? These are questions to consider to ensure that your event is not only safe but effective. No matter where your action is, make sure to notify people like the police, security, or a manager before showing up. This will prevent the awkward disappointment of finding out that some other event is already happening and there is nowhere to hold yours, or that you’re not allowed on the property. 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 by crime or poverty (or whatever issue you are seeking to address)? Politicians? Line up a diverse group of dynamic speakers to offer their perspective and wisdom. Encourage these people to keep their speeches short and punchy. No one likes rallies that go on and on.
Consider transportation needs. If your event or action is to be held outside of an urban area you may have to consider renting a van or organizing carpools for people. If it is in a city, ensure that directions for bus routes, parking, and places to lock bikes are made clear. Making this information known will help your event run more smoothly and make people more likely to come.

Incorporate music and or humour. Music and or humour can help to lighten up your event or activity, without taking away the seriousness of your message. Find ways to incorporate these elements. A group of “raging grannies” is always fun. Make sure that any political satire remains in good taste. If you are including a walk or march as part of your event, add some drummers or dancers who can lead the group and help to build and maintain energy.

Engage the media and social media. If you have decided that you would like lots of people to participate in your action, use a variety of tools to get the word out. Public Facebook events are becoming the go-to tool for organizing demonstrations; not only do they help spread the word quickly, but if they gain momentum, the media will more likely notice. For more on this topic, see “Send out a press release” (page 5.5) and “Use social media” (page 5.9).

Don’t forget equipment and supplies. Don’t just assume that your speakers will have booming voices; make sure to arrange for a megaphone or microphone. As well, bring along a milk crate or something to elevate the speakers so the crowd can see them. Have a table with supplies like cardboard, wooden sign holders, nails and markers for people to make signs. Seasoned activists will bring their own supplies, but the majority of the crowd will not. Give them the tools to advocate.

Prepare for disruptions. Although most people who attend a demonstration are like-minded in the pursuit of justice, opinions still vary and things can get heated, especially when some folks show up who have a different perspective. Make sure to have a small group of people who are trained to dissipate conflicts that may arise safely and peacefully; this will help to make your event positive and effective. If you plan to perform any sort of civil disobedience, do make sure to know what may happen if you are arrested, and understand the safety hazards and implications of doing so. For example, an arrest or detention on your record can make it much more difficult for you to travel.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

EVERY YEAR ON SEPTEMBER 21 (UN International Day for Peace, Non-violence and Ceasefire), Anabaptist churches across Colombia celebrate and call for peace and justice with a movement called “Pan y Paz” (bread and peace). Pan y Paz brings together communities in nonviolent direct action in a call for an end to violence and the provision of enough food for all. In the village of San Nicholas, a community with many displaced families and desperate youth, members of the Anabaptist congregation Church of the Resurrection gather to pray and prepare, and then lead residents in a march during which they sing, carry signs and candles, and hand out bread to people they meet.

The Pan y Paz march in 2014 was especially poignant, because, just as the congregation was gathering, word came that yet another despairing youth had taken his own life. Subdued by this tragic event, the people felt their message was even more urgent. They wept and prayed for comfort, and then proceeded with their march, carrying candles of hope, messages of peace, and baskets of freshly baked bread. In a context in which a 50-year armed conflict has displaced millions and contributed to hunger, poverty and a culture of violence, the Pan y Paz movement fosters the building of communities of love, peace, mutual support and hope for the future.
Why advocate?

Many people ask MCC why we engage in advocacy. Some people wonder about the “political” nature of advocacy and whether such activity is appropriate for Christians. Others wonder if advocacy makes any difference — after all, governments are slow and often resistant to change. Still others are simply drawn to more tangible and more immediate responses to human need.

Here, we offer the main reasons why MCC believes engaging in advocacy is important. We hope these reasons convince you that advocacy is important, necessary, and an expression of faithful Christian discipleship and witness. We do advocacy:

1. Because our partners request it of us.

MCC works with all kinds of local partners in Canada and some 60 countries around the world, many of whom are church partners. Scripture reminds us that when parts of the body suffer, all members suffer (I Corinthians 12). And so, when MCC’s partners — Christians, as well as people of other faith traditions — call us to do advocacy on their behalf, we respond as best we can.

Over the years, Indigenous partners in Canada have asked MCC to advocate with them for their treaty rights, for improved housing and water systems, for education funding equal to those levels provided to non-Indigenous people, and more.

For decades, people in Laos and Cambodia have been killed or injured by cluster munitions detonated years after U.S. planes dropped them. Our partners have asked MCC for help not only with providing prostheses for victims and removing cluster munitions still remaining in the soil, but with advocacy for a ban on cluster munitions.

More recently, Canadian-based corporations have emerged as leaders in mining and resource extraction around the world. MCC’s partners in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean have asked MCC to advocate for laws that would hold these companies accountable for the health impacts, social disruption, economic injustice, and environmental destruction associated with mining activities in their communities.

2. Because it is biblical.

The Bible is filled with stories of people who acted as advocates on behalf of others. Shiphrah and Puah, Hebrew midwives, risked their lives by refusing Pharaoh’s order to kill all Hebrew baby boys (Exodus 1). Moses was called by God to issue a clear message to Pharaoh: “Let my people go!” (Exodus 5-12). Elijah confronted King Ahab when he killed Naboth and confiscated his vineyard (I Kings 21). Other prophets repeatedly denounced kings who enriched themselves and impoverished others (Amos, Isaiah, Micah).

When the churches and communities that we partner with suffer as a result of the policies and practices of the Canadian government and/or Canadian citizens, it seems only obvious to them that they should tell MCC and member churches in Canada about how that are impacted, so that we can share this information, and urge a change in policy and practice, to help end their suffering. That is advocacy.

Bonnie Klassen
Some biblical characters acted as advocates within political structures, rather than from outside them. Esther pled with her husband, the King of Persia, not to kill her kinfolk the Jewish people (Esther 4-8). Daniel, an administrator for King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, intervened to prevent the execution of “wise men” who could not interpret the King’s dream (Daniel 2). Some of Israel and Judah’s kings worked for the good of their people, acting justly and caring for the poor and destitute (Psalm 72).

Jesus did not directly confront the Roman political leadership of Palestine, but he certainly was an advocate to the religious leaders of his day. He condemned the Pharisees and scribes as hypocrites who sought glory from people rather than God, and who neglected the weighty matters of the Law. He confronted the powerful Sadducees for collaborating with the Roman occupiers. And when his words did not explicitly challenge the powers, his actions did. He healed on the Sabbath; ate with tax collectors, sinners and prostitutes; touched lepers and menstruating women; and disobeyed Jewish food practices. In the last week of his life, he overturned the tables of merchants and money changers in the temple courtyard, sending a very clear message to the temple priests.

3. Because it is part of our historic tradition.

Mennonites in Canada have, for over two centuries, advocated to the government to seek laws, policies, regulations and other governmental actions that would benefit them and their people.

In 1786, when Mennonites came to Upper Canada from the U.S., they requested and received exemption from military service. A century later, in 1873, when Mennonites from Russia sought a new home in western Canada, they sought governmental assurance that they be allowed to settle on land in blocks, run their own private schools, and be exempted from military service.

In 1920, thousands of Mennonites were seeking to escape South Russia because of war, revolution and famine. Canada, however, had closed its door to Mennonite, Hutterite and Doukhobor immigration in 1919. A special delegation, led by Bishop David Toews of Saskatchewan, appealed to both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition to once again open the door. This successful advocacy led to the immigration of nearly 21,000 Mennonites to Canada between 1923 and 1930.

During World War II, numerous groups of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ leaders travelled to Ottawa to negotiate regulations governing conscientious objection, exemption from military service and alternative service.

Throughout their history, Mennonites and Brethren in Christ people in Canada have made it a practice to engage in advocacy for measures that would benefit themselves. Given this history, it seems only right that Mennonites and MCC would also choose to advocate on behalf of others.

**CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION** — a refusal to participate in war — has been a longstanding conviction of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. Today, the precedent of history and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms — particularly Article II which upholds freedom of religion and conscience — are considered the foundation upon which Christian pacifists rely for exemption from military service, should there be conscription in the future. But until the 1990s there weren’t provisions for people who aren’t from a pacifist tradition but who become conscientious objectors (COs) while in military service. MCC played a key role in advocating for CO provisions for soldiers who came to a position of conscientious objection while in military service.
4. Because it can address the root causes of suffering.

As an organization dedicated to partnering with others to alleviate human need, we at MCC learned that it is important to try and address the root causes of suffering and not only their symptoms. While direct service — such as providing food, blankets and relief kits — is essential in contexts of disaster or war, situations of chronic need require different responses. Sustainable community development can be helpful, but where systemic injustice or power imbalances exist, it is important to address these structural problems. Here are just two examples.

For decades, MCC has been working alongside Palestinians and Israelis for a just peace. For many years, much of this work focused on education and vocational training, agricultural extension, irrigation and water recycling, and marketing — this work focused on Palestinians who lived under Israeli military occupation in the Palestinian territories. But increasingly, Palestinians — and supportive Israelis — have called for an end to the occupation. They have also called on the international community to help put pressure on the Israeli government to end the occupation and negotiate a just peace with Palestinians.

Refugee sponsorship and resettlement has been close to the heart of MCC’s ministry since 1920 when MCC was founded. In the late 1970s, MCC Canada was the first of many church groups to sign a Private Sponsorship Agreement with the federal government. This opened the door for Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches to sponsor nearly 5,000 refugees from Southeast Asia; since then, Canadian Mennonites have sponsored refugees from many different parts of the world. Most of these refugees have been seeking to flee war and armed conflict. In both Canada and the U.S., MCC has called on our governments to support non-military responses to conflict around the world, and to address the root causes of violence and displacement so that people do not need to flee their homes.

5. Because we know that it can make a difference.

Advocacy work can be very slow and discouraging, but we can point to stories where advocacy has made a significant difference. Brief stories of success are scattered throughout this toolkit; here is only one.

In 2003 the war drums were beating. The U.S. was preparing to invade Iraq and was looking for other countries to join a “coalition of the willing.” Canada was under considerable pressure to join the war. Many Canadians, including Canadian churches, urged Prime Minister Chrétien not to join the Iraq war. Organizations like KAIROS, Project Ploughshares and the Canadian Council of Churches put out newspaper ads, gathering 40,000 signatures. MCC also put out a letter, inviting members of constituent churches to add their signatures. Over 2,000 people signed the letter.

Eventually, Prime Minister Chrétien decided against official Canadian participation in the war. Sometime later he told a Lutheran bishop that the voice of Christian churches had been critical in his decision. He said, “The unanimous opposition expressed by church leaders made a huge difference in the cabinet discussion.”

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RICARDO ESQUIVIA is a Colombian Mennonite and a human rights lawyer. He has devoted his life to advocating on behalf of people displaced by the activities of transnational corporations and various military and para-military forces. His work confronts powerful people and powerful interests; consequently, his life has been threatened on numerous occasions. The largest threat that he faced, on the majority of these occasions, was arrest by the state. Several times in the past decade, Colombian Mennonite organizations Justapaz and Sembrandopaz have issued international calls for letters, telegrams and faxes to Colombian authorities to ensure Esquivia’s safety. On one occasion, Esquivia was brought before government officials and was shown a large pile of letters and other communications. “You have many friends,” he was told. So far, Esquivia has not been arrested or physically harmed.
The previous section outlined the “why” of MCC advocacy. This section identifies some of the principles that guide our work. In other words, this section describes the spirituality that informs MCC’s speaking to government. Perhaps these elements can guide your own advocacy.

**Solidarity.** MCC’s advocacy efforts arise out of our program work – more specifically, from the call of partners that we work with in Canada and around the world. We try to respond to the longing of real people for justice, peace and human dignity, and we call for government actions and policies that will address those longings. We are inspired by the biblical call to “speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:9). But more than speaking for, we seek to speak with those who demand justice. In other words, we try to be about solidarity. In the words of Samantha Baker Evens, a mission worker among the poor in Cambodia, “We are not ‘a voice for the voiceless;’ we lend our privilege as a megaphone.”

**Integrity.** We know that words and deeds go together; deeds in fact give integrity to words (James 2:14-17). MCC has learned over the years that the words we speak and write to government have weight when they are rooted in the practices of MCC’s supporting congregations and communities as they do God’s work in the world. We can only urge our government to welcome refugees because the communities that support us are willing and ready to sponsor refugees. We can only call on the government to implement restorative justice approaches within the corrections system because ordinary MCC supporters are involved in programs like prison visitation, victim assistance, or Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA). We depend on the practical service and witness of our supporting communities to give our work integrity.

*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

*Amos 5:24*
Advocacy is not the only tool we need to use in caring for others, but there are definitely times when our best and most helpful response to pain and suffering in this world is to amplify the voice of our partners, our brothers and sisters, and direct this voice toward those who can change the policies and practices that cause suffering.  

Bonnie Klassen

Respect. In our advocacy work, we try to be respectful of all people in the political system — to treat them as we would wish to be treated (Matthew 7:12), whether we agree with them or not. We try not to be drawn into partisan debates, although we admit that this is sometimes very difficult. Sometimes our commitment to truth-telling makes us want to loudly denounce particular people or policies (and perhaps there is a time for that). We remind ourselves that no one political party has a monopoly on the truth and that each person in “the system” is a child of God, worthy of our respect and consideration.

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 to our partners, 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. Sometimes we simply don’t have practical alternatives to suggest.

Lament. Sometimes, when we as MCC workers listen well and are really honest with ourselves, we glimpse the insight that we – as individuals, as an organization, as a church – are part of the problem, rather than the solution. Even though we may consider ourselves advocates for social justice, at times our partners remind us otherwise. Our Indigenous partners, for example, remind us of the ways that Mennonites have participated in and benefited from the colonial history of Canada, and the ways that MCC continues to perpetuate unequal relationships with Indigenous peoples. At times, we can only confess, weep and lament.

Hope. Our advocacy is inspired by a big hope — an eschatological hope. 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, or some helpful new regulations, the results often fall short of our goals. Yet if we depended on this kind of “success” to carry on, we probably would abandon the task. As people of faith, we are assured that the arc of the universe bends towards justice. We remember the promise that God’s reign of justice and peace will surely come (Isaiah 2:1-5, Luke 4:18-19). And so we carry on, believing that God blesses our efforts and makes them bear fruit in ways we may not see.
Advocacy: A set of organized actions aimed at influencing and/or changing the behaviours, policies, and resource allocation of individuals or institutions that hold power, for the betterment of people affected by an issue.

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: The collective body of members of Parliament from the governing party who are designated by the prime minister to be the heads of specific government departments.

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.

Governor General: The Governor General is the Queen’s representative and head of state for Canada. He or she is appointed by the prime minister and serves for a set term. The Governor General, on behalf of the Queen, gives royal assent to all legislation that is passed by Parliament.

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. 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.

Opposition Critic: A Member of Parliament who is assigned to hold a particular portfolio (e.g. Foreign Affairs, Indigenous Affairs, Defense, International Development, Justice, etc.) 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.

Private Member’s Bill: As individuals, members of Parliament can present bills that they have developed and introduce them in the House of Commons to be considered.

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 is in need of 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.
Dear Minister Morneau,

I oppose war and killing and consider myself a conscientious objector. As a conscientious objector, I am opposed to paying taxes which are used for the purpose of war and preparations for war.

For over 200 years, Canada has honoured the convictions of conscientious objectors by making provisions for exemption from direct military service. In 1982, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms guaranteed freedom of conscience in Article II.

It is time that Canada extend provisions for conscientious objection to the payment of taxes for military purposes. Currently, approximately 8 percent of what I pay in income tax is used for military purposes. As a conscientious objector, it pains me deeply that my tax money is used in this way.

I ask you to support the creation of a special Peace Tax Fund to which conscientious objectors could designate the military portion of their tax. This special fund could be used to research, advance and promote peaceful means of conflict resolution. I ask you to work to bring forward a bill that would create such a fund.

A Peace Tax Fund is needed in order for Canada to respect fully its commitment to freedom of conscience.

Sincerely,

[ your name ]
[ include full mailing address ]
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Former Prime Minister headlines celebration of MCC Manitoba’s 50th

November 15 celebration to feature the Right Honourable Joe Clark, local musical talent

Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba’s (MCCM) 50th anniversary celebrations will culminate in a November 15 benefit concert featuring former Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Joe Clark, as keynote speaker.

Musical acts include the Faith and Life Men’s and Women’s Choirs, the University of Manitoba Women’s Chorus and the Buffalo Gals Drum Group. A limited number of tickets are still available for the free event, and an offering will be taken at the event in support of MCCM’s new effort to provide affordable housing in Manitoba.

In 50 years, Manitobans have donated over $200 million to support disaster relief, community development and peacebuilding work through MCC Manitoba.

CONCERT DETAILS:

MCC Manitoba 50th Anniversary Benefit Concert
Saturday, November 15, 2014 – 7:00 PM
Immanuel Pentecostal Church
955 Wilkes Ave., Winnipeg MB

For tickets, visit mccmanitoba.ca/50 or call (204)261-6381.

CONTACT: Jane Doe
Community Engagement and Events Coordinator, MCC Manitoba
Phone: (555) 555-1234
E-mail: mediaandpressreleases@mennonitecc.ca
Website: http://mcccanada.ca/
Sample petition

We the undersigned agree to support a PETITION TO ESTABLISH A DEPARTMENT OF PEACE TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS IN PARLIAMENT ASSEMBLED -

Whereas non-violent peace has been sought by people since time immemorial;

Whereas there exist proven methodologies for the non-violent resolution of conflict;

Whereas the Military-Industrial Complex ought to be constrained from perpetuating armed conflict;

Whereas the promotion of a culture of nonviolent peace should be placed firmly in decision making structure of the government;

Whereas Canada’s foreign and military policy should return to UN peacekeeping, peacebuilding and peace diplomacy;

Whereas, to redirect this policy consistent with Canada’s interests for peace and human security, there is an urgent need for a Federal Department of Peace to establish a sustainable culture of peace at home and abroad through the creation of a Minister of Peace in Cabinet;

Whereas over a million Canadians actively support a federal Department of Peace as an important Ministerial position to provide critical leadership in the heart of government towards ensuring the federal government’s commitment to the promotion of peace worldwide;

THEREFORE, your petitioners call upon Parliament to establish a Department of Peace headed by a Minister of Peace as a senior cabinet position; and that this Department will reinvigorate Canada’s role as a global peacebuilder and work towards developing Culture of Peace and Nonviolent Resolution of Conflicts as a top priority.

Thank you.

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Join us in advocacy for justice, peace and human dignity. Learn about current MCC campaigns at mccottawa.ca.