



City Hall and State Legislative Hearings

**United Methodist
Church – North
Carolina
Conference**

**Board of Church
and Society**

This series provides congregations and individuals the skills to build and deploy justice ministries and advocacy methods. Other methods in this series include:

**Building a relationship with your elected representative*

**Writing a letter or email to your elected representative*

**Writing a letter to the press, blog or website*

**Organizing a rally or protest meeting*

**Building a congregational justice ministry*

**Proposing legislation*

**Parish based Community Organizing*

**Creating a Conference Resolution*

**Asset Based Community Development*

**Challenging legislators*

**Community Listening*

The Board of Church and Society provides advocacy and justice programs for congregations.

<https://nccumc.org/christianformation/church-and-society/>

Two levels of government, the City Hall, and the State Legislature, hold public meetings and provide the public with opportunity to speak to legislators. These two types of hearings have similar profiles. Large numbers of people attend if the topic under review is controversial, small numbers if the topic is not. Both have similar processes to allow you to speak to the legislative committee or group, and the opportunity to present your individual or group's point of view is open to the general public. So you have the opportunity to spread the word about your position on the issue. This in itself will give your organization public visibility.

Typically the date, place and time of a public hearing is well advertised by advocacy groups if the topic under review is controversial, but if not, you need to go to the legislative body's web site to ascertain the logistical information about the hearing.

Public hearings have two audiences, the legislators and the general public, many of whom may become your best advocates, so "speak" to them as well.

Preparation

- Be clear about your position on the issue, and collect all the facts by reading any proposed legislation on the legislative body's web site.
- Prepare your case and argument and prepare a one page document outlining the following:
 - List your organizations name and contact details
 - Head up the paper with the name of the draft legislation or issue
 - The opening paragraph should state your position definitively, namely, you oppose the whole bill, or selected parts of it, you have alternatives to offer, or you voice your support for the bill. This latter point is important because you want the legislators of all political persuasions to know that the bill on offer has merit.
 - You should provide data and reasons for your position.
 - Describe the consequences as you see them for society and your constituents.
 - Propose alterations if you see that need.
 - Practice your public statement before you attend the hearing.
- Register your willingness to speak to the legislators at the hearing. This may be a requirement of the process. Check the legislative web site, or arrive early and register with the legislative staff.
- Plan to take supporters with you, the more the better, as it shows the legislators you are acting with others. Assign recording tasks among them. Have someone take pictures if this is allowed during the hearing process.

Action at the Hearing

- Consider the audience and the location when deciding how to dress but it is suggested that you are neat and presentable, and present yourself as businesslike as possible.
- Shake hands with the legislators if the opportunity presents itself.
- If you have colleagues and supporters, the hearing may allow them to stand behind you as a show of support. Otherwise disperse the supporters around the hearing room to gather reactions from others in the room.
- Introduce yourself and your organization.
- State your position and run through your prepared statement. This verbal statement must be consistent with any written statement that you provide to the legislative committee for the record. Make sure you have copies for each legislative member. Speak for no more than three minutes. The Hearing may limit your speaking time anyway.

ADVOCACY BUILDING

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- Be prepared to answer questions.
- If a legislator objects to your position, ask why and get clarification as to the legislator's opinion of the effects of his or her position. Challenge if you feel you have more accurate alternative facts.
- Remember that other members of the public are present and it's important that they hear your point of view, you may gain more supporters.
- Stay on topic, no distractions and avoid being distracted by the legislators, typically those who oppose your position will try to throw you off. Don't become defensive when attacked, stand your ground.
- Remain calm and respectful - try to find points of agreement and reinforce that agreement.
- Make sure a member of your group is taking notes for further review.

Post Hearing Review

- As soon as possible after the hearing meet with your group and review the events.
- Write to each legislator at the hearing thanking them for their understanding. Reinforce in one sentence what your position is and affirm your agreement with those with whom you agreed.
- Review your advocacy strategy in the light of your new understanding of the issues, and the positions of the legislators. You may have an opportunity to advance amended or alternative positions that become evident. Change to legislation happens all the time, often as a result of information shared at hearings. Legislators don't have all the facts when they formulate legislation, and it is your responsibility to expose facts which help in the legislative process.
- Always agree to meet a legislator at their request, sometimes they want to hear more.
- Review the submissions of other groups, both those supporting and opposing the issues at the hearing. Knowing where your potential coalition allies are is helpful, and knowing where your opposition is important to re-direct your advocacy strategy to reduce the opposition's effectiveness.
- Always look for new allies to build coalitions that cut across other sectors of society.
- Keep track of the progress of the draft legislation, and be prepared to attend further hearings if necessary.
- Write letters to the press expressing your position, this helps build your case with the public.
- Prepare and issue a public statement, it may get published as part of a news report.
- Hold a Press Conference if you can to express your organizations position more publically. Getting on the TV news is always a plus.
- Update your organization's web site with the hearing's events.

Public hearings can be boisterous and noisy, so be prepared to stand your ground if you attract opposition to your position from among the audience. Do not shout or argue, and don't become defensive. Being the only adult in the room can be noticed by those with influence. Build you own and your organization's stature in the public eye by keeping to the facts, being professional in all interactions, and by offering solutions and not just problems.

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