



California Church **IMPACT**

HOW TO INFLUENCE YOUR LEGISLATOR *CALIFORNIA CHURCH IMPACT*

INTRODUCTION

Fully recognizing the tensions that have characterized church/state relationships throughout our history, California Church IMPACT believes that we, as people of faith, will always face the dual responsibility of being steadfast in our beliefs and conscience while at the same time being active participants in society and government. To do this, all citizens should be aware of what their elected officials are doing. We need not only to vote but to participate continually in advocating for social justice by giving guidance to officials during their tenure in office. We are a 'moral plumb line' not an inflexible iron rod, and our opinions therefore are equal to those of any member of a secular group and deserve to be heard.

LET LEGISLATORS KNOW WHAT YOU THINK

Legislators are interested in what their constituents think and believe. There are many ways to contact your state and federal representatives: in person at their district offices; in town meetings held by the officials; in the state and federal capitol offices; by phone, FAX, email, and occasionally letters. Legislators are often quite willing to visit your church or group. Outside of the 45-day window before an election when the legislator is a candidate, they may freely attend your event or come to a specific meeting to be present to meet you. At election time, a church must engage in 'equal time' for all candidates if any candidate, including an incumbent, is to appear at a place of worship.

Face-to-Face Meetings. Such meetings are very effective. Make every effort to make arrangements with local district offices to do this. We encourage district visits since they are more convenient for you and have great impact. You do not need to come to Sacramento. Legislators are often available on Fridays, over weekends, and on session breaks at holiday time and from Labor Day to New Year's. You may well meet with legislative district staff - this is excellent! These are the people who are often better briefed on issues than the legislator and who often are more receptive to you than the elected official.

Guidelines for Your Meeting. Keep your group to the size the district office says it can hold. Also - try not to go alone. You are especially effective if your group represents several different constituencies - faith, teachers, labor, seniors, parents, etc. A coalition has real clout and extends the authority. If your group is too large, legislators tend to make speeches - that is not helpful for your being heard.

Your group should become informed on the legislator's voting record and stands on issues. Pick clear spokespeople who can stay 'on message'. Create five or six points at the most about which you want to talk. Make your questions very focused - "what is your stand on welfare" opens too wide a door and permits vague and general replies. If you're asking for action on an issue or bill, keep the discussion on values and human impacts - take data and all tables, charts, graphs, in written form to leave with the legislator. Do not try to force it all into the conversation! Attempt to find areas of agreement with even

hostile legislators, and see if you can find common, moral values you share - even if your routes to upholding those values differ. Those are the keys to real conversations and communication.

Timing is Important. The most **effective time to communicate with your** legislator is around a vote on a bill or the budget. You can ask for and receive updates and notices when those bills are to go to committee votes. You may use the end of session break (Labor Day-New Year's) to introduce new issues you would like to legislator to consider creating a bill around.

You may track bills of your interest through the Senate or Assembly web sites:

www.sen.ca.gov www.assembly.ca.gov

California Church IMPACT has a slate of bills and will try to keep track of their progress on the website:

www.churchimpact.org

Writing to Legislators. We do not recommend, in the age of anthrax, that you send actual mail to either Congress or the state legislature since it can be held up in the mail room from several weeks to months while it is screened. Instead, use email (now very much the norm in Sacramento and Washington) or write your letter and send by FAX. Follow these guidelines:

- Write about one subject per letter. Be direct, be brief, be to the point.
- Make your letter courteous no matter how annoyed you may be.
- Refer to bills by number or by the bill's popular name
- Give reasons for your own position in your own words and in terms of your own values and experiences and knowledge of human consequences
- Raise question that must be answered. A well-formulated question can express a viewpoint and encourage a thoughtful, versus canned, reply.

Email: You may go to IMPACT web site: www.churchimpact.org enter your address and then find your legislators. When you need to contact the legislator, state or federal, you just click on your representative to send an email. From IMPACT alerts, you will be able to go directly to the page for emails.

We do not offer pre-written letters since they look foolish coming from fewer than several thousand people and since it really is your thoughts, your knowledge, your beliefs that carry real weight. Convenient "click and send" messages are now being looked on as forms of "spam" in some quarters.

Phone calls: These work fine to the district office in short-time emergency situations. State your name, whom you represent if you choose (denomination, IMPACT, some particular group), then what concerns you and what you want the legislator to do about it. Calls will be relayed to the state capitol offices. They count!

Remember also to contact legislators you like and admire to reinforce your support of them!

IN ALL INSTANCES PROVIDE YOUR NAME, ADDRESS, AND IF REQUESTED, YOUR PHONE NUMBER.

Please thank the staff person whom you see or to whom you talk and thank you legislator for his/her time even if the visit has left you grinding your teeth. We are people of faith. We need to take the high road - the low road is awfully crowded!