

# **SOCIAL JUSTICE U**

**Learn. Pray. Act.**  
*The Common Wealth  
depends on us.*



**Dear Friends:**

**Welcome to the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy's summer advocacy training series called *Social Justice U*. In some ways we wanted to call this year's training *Social Justice YOU* because you are at the center of this day. We chose the former but are dedicated to ensuring the latter is true.**

**The Interfaith Center is excited to announce that it now has 10 Regional Chapters around Virginia and we are looking to add at least two more in 2005. In many ways our Chapters have become one of the most important focal points for the Center. The Chapters are where we are doing our best work in educating congregations and individuals in faithful democracy.**

**I hope you will become more involved in your local Chapter and discover the wonderful ways that you can help to better our Commonwealth and our world. We are gearing up for a wonderfully exciting future where people of faith are united to build a more just and compassionate Commonwealth. To do that we invite you to LEARN with us, PRAY with us and ACT with us on behalf of the poor and marginalized in Virginia. When we say that the "Common Wealth depends us," it is very true. Virginia's future is in the hands of caring and concerned people of faith who want to see our civic engagement consistent with the God whom we serve.**

**Peace to You  
Doug**

**The Rev. C. Douglas Smith  
Executive Director**

# Advocacy Guide Contents

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Learn. Pray. Act. The Common Wealth depends on us.	4
About the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy	5
The Legislative Process	6
The Spectrum of Social Ministry: From Charity to Social Justice	8
Should Faith Communities be Involved in Public Policy Issues?	9
How the Virginia Interfaith Center Operates	9
Some Dos and Don'ts of Religious Advocacy	10
Tips for Legislative Advocacy	11
Other Methods of Communicating Your Concerns	12
Tips for Writing Effective Letters to the Editors	13
Scriptural Passages Concerning Social Justice	14
Important Contact Information	15

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# **Learn. Pray. Act**

***The Common Wealth depends on us.***

## **LEARN**

The Virginia Interfaith Center engages the faith community and educates the public regarding social issues, the legislative process, and faith based advocacy. We accomplish this by disseminating legislative information via email action alerts, publishing LegisLink and Interact newsletters, and providing forums, trainings, and guest speakers in our eleven regional chapters.

## **PRAY**

The Virginia Interfaith Center strives to provide a spiritual presence at the legislature and calls on its members to discern God's prophetic call to advocate for the poor and marginalized. Members and their congregations are encouraged to pray for all elected officials and to encourage their legislators to utilize faith when making decisions. Further, the Virginia Interfaith Center supplies each legislator with a prayer leaflet on the first day of the session. This brochure includes scripture from the sacred texts of the three traditions of the Interfaith Center as well as some suggested prayers. The Executive Director and clergy from the Center's membership frequently open the daily sessions with prayer.

## **ACT**

Beyond learning and praying, Virginia Interfaith Center members advocate by contacting legislators year round via handwritten notes, letters, e-mails, phone calls, and personal visits. Participants also join faith-based advocacy days during the General Assembly including a day for Catholics, United Methodists, the Jewish Community and the Center's own Day of All People of Faith. Throughout the year, Interfaith Center staff are engaged in advocacy with legislators and members of the Administration.

# About the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy

*"The Interfaith Center provides a guiding moral beacon in the troubled waters of the legislative process."*

Senator Edward R. Houck, District 17, Democrat

*"We need the Virginia Interfaith Center around to remind us that we all serve the God of Justice."*

Senator John C. Watkins, District 10, Republican

*"The Virginia Interfaith Center is a voice for those who have no voice and it provides encouragement for those who have no cheering section."*

Bishop Joe E. Pennel, Jr., formerly of the Virginia Conference, United Methodist Church

™ ***The Virginia Interfaith Center is Virginia's only statewide interfaith partnership focused on faith-based citizenship and advocacy.*** The Center was founded in 1982 after years of informal interfaith partnerships.

™ The Center's focus is three-fold: education, legislative advocacy, and providing a spiritual presence to the Virginia state legislature.

™ This unique partnership includes **21 member faith groups** (Roman Catholic, Jewish, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, Friends, Baptist, Brethren, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist), **several faith-based organizations** (three Jewish federations, two Islamic organizations, the Virginia Council of Churches, the Virginia Poverty Law Center, Voices for Virginia's Children, CARITAS, and others), engaged **congregations**, and over **1000 individuals**.

™ The Center's membership drafts its Legislative Agenda each year. Once adopted by the Board, the agenda becomes the basis for the Center's legislative advocacy. ***In the advocacy area, the Center partners with other religious and secular organizations that share similar concerns.***

™ The core issues on which the Center will focus during the 2005 General Assembly Session include: ***tax equity, poverty and the working poor, health care, at-risk children and youth, capital punishment, and housing and homelessness.***

Some illustrations from recent sessions wherein the Center was successful in collaboration with others:

- **Income tax credit for the poor.** Before the income tax credit, Virginia was the fifth highest taxing state for the working poor in the country. The Center, in partnership with others, was able to raise the threshold of taxation from \$5400 to the federal poverty level. For FY 2002, over 154,500 Virginia taxpayers received over \$17 million in credits, a significant help for the working poor.
- **Grocery tax decrease for all Virginians.** In 2004, we effectively worked with legislators to ensure the reduction in the grocery tax from 4% to 2.5% in order to reduce the regressivity of overall tax increases. This will ensure that families will be more able to provide nutritious food.
- **Child Care.** The General Assembly has provided a significant increase in funding for this essential service to working families, making quality day care more accessible and affordable.
- **Housing Continuum of Services.** This continuum directly supports persons moving from shelters to homes, increases state support of shelters, and provides supervision for the increasing number of children in shelters.

For further information, please visit our website at [www.vicpp.org](http://www.vicpp.org)

# The Legislative Process

## The General Assembly

The General Assembly of Virginia meets annually. The annual session begins on the second Wednesday in January. During even-numbered years, the session continues for 60 consecutive days in order to provide time for biennial budget negotiations. During odd-numbered years, it continues for 45 days. Any session may be extended for up to thirty days by a two-thirds majority vote of the General Assembly members.

In addition, the General Assembly may be convened for a Special Session at any time. A Special Session can be called by the Governor, if she or he determines that it is necessary and advisable to do so. The General Assembly also reconvenes six weeks after the annual session to act on any legislation the Governor has vetoed or postponed.

The opening day of each session is mostly organizational and ceremonial. The Governor addresses both bodies in the House chamber to present the "*State of the State*" address. This occasion allows the Governor to present the legislative priorities of the executive branch. The Governor presents the Budget Bill on second day of the even-numbered year.

## The Senate

There are 40 **Senators**; each elected for a four-year term. Each Senator represents approximately 155,000 persons.

The **Lt. Governor** is President of the Senate, and has no vote except to break a tie.

**Standing Committees** are elected by the Senate. These committees consider all legislation introduced, hold hearings, and report their recommendations to the full Senate. These committees meet at regularly scheduled times and on call during each session and also between sessions. Each Standing Committee Chairperson may organize **Subcommittees** composed of legislators who are members of that committee to consider categories of bills and make recommendations to the full committee.

Consideration is generally given to the background and vocation of the Senators, as well as their requests in making committee appointments. These committees function the same as the House of Delegates Standing Committees: They consider all legislation introduced, hold hearings and report recommendations to the House.

## House of Delegates

There are 100 **Delegates**; each elected for a two-year term. Each Delegate represents approximately 63,000 citizens.

The **Speaker of the House** presides over the deliberations of the House and is elected by the House from among its members on the first day of the even numbered session. The speaker is elected for a two-year term.

**Standing Committees** in the House are appointed by the Speaker. In other regards, they are similar to Senate Standing Committees. In conducting their business, Standing Committees are governed by the Rules of the House.

## Rules

Most legislative procedures are traditional or it is established by Senate and House Rules committees though they may be changed at any regular session of the Assembly.

### **Forms of Legislative Proposals**

The most common form of legislation in the General Assembly usually deals with the **Bill**. A bill is a proposed law presented to the legislature for consideration and possible enactment. A bill may originate in either chamber (House or Senate) of the General Assembly. Bills, as a rule, amend, add, or repeal sections of the Code of Virginia.

**Emergency bills** must be noted as such and passed by 2/3rds of the Chamber. Emergency bills take effect immediately.

**Resolutions** are another form of action the Legislature can take. Resolutions are expressions of a mandate, order, opinion, sense, feeling, or sentiment of one house or both houses. It does not have the force of a law and does not require the Governor's signature.

House or Senate Resolutions do not normally go beyond the bounds of the respective house and deals with internal affairs or interests alone.

**Joint Resolutions** can be initiated by either house and must have the concurrence of both. Such a resolution is captioned **House** or **Senate Resolution** depending on the body of origin.

### **Studies**

Because the Virginian Legislature is a short term, the legislative process is furthered by the use of **legislative studies** involving legislators and on occasion citizens in developing legislation to be introduced. Advocates need to be alert to these studies as they are in progress.

### **Cross-Over**

**Cross-over** is the date when those bills passed by one house must have crossed over to the other. It usually occurs midway through the Legislative Session.

### **Conference Committees**

As each house completes its work on the other house's bills, those where changes have been made necessitate committees of members of each house to work out the differences.

### **The Governor in Virginia**

Legislation passed by both Houses goes to the Governor. He or she may sign it into law, make suggested amendments, or veto it. The General Assembly meets six weeks after the session to consider the Governor's action. Among all the **governors** of the 50 states, Virginia's has as much authority and power as any. That affects the legislative process, for his or her word goes a long way in determining the fate of legislation. Also, when legislation becomes law, it is the Governor's administration that does the implementation—another place where his or her authority is exercised in shaping the way legislation is carried out.

# The Spectrum of Social Ministry: From Charity to Social Justice

<b>Charity. . .Social Service</b>	<b>Justice. . .Social Change</b>
<p>Scriptural Reference: Good Samaritan Story</p> <p>The Gospel story does not attempt to survey the causes of highway banditry. The Samaritan provides temporary and immediate relief.</p>	<p>Scriptural Reference: Exodus Story</p> <p>Moses does not ask for food and medicine for Jewish slave labor force. He challenges the institutional system. Message: "Let my people go!"</p>
Private, individual acts	Public, collective actions
Responds to immediate need	Responds to a long-term need
Provides direct service: food, clothing, shelter	Promotes social change in institutions
Requires repeated actions	Resolves structural injustice
Directed at the effects of injustice: symptoms	Directed at the root causes of social injustice
<b>Examples</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Homeless shelters, food shelves, clothing drives, emergency services	Legislative advocacy, changing corporate policies or practices, congregation-based community organizing

# Should faith communities be involved in public policy issues?

***Faith communities should be involved in public policy issues*** because:

- When government determines a public policy it is making a choice, and choice is the basis of morality.
- In serving a God of justice, the faith community witnesses to that God through the legislative process.

The faith communities of the Interfaith Center have inherited the role of holding the governmental leaders accountable for their decisions.

Since 1982, the Virginia Interfaith Center has been a respected voice bringing people of faith together in effective advocacy for human dignity and social justice. Each faith community has unique concerns, but broad public policy consensus brings together diverse faith communities to make a common witness around these concerns. The Interfaith Center is uniquely structured to represent the passions of the faith community on behalf of the politically weak and marginalized. If faith communities fail to speak in concert on important matters of public morality, other voices will prevail.

## How the Virginia Interfaith Center Operates

### **Who determines the position Virginia Interfaith Center will take on legislative issues?**

The Center's members and faith community leaders are polled annually to determine priorities. The poll is tabulated and reported to the Board, which in turn establishes the legislative agenda and legislative concerns.

### **How does the Virginia Interfaith Center promote its legislative agenda?**

When the priorities have been determined (usually by mid August), statistics and "talking points" are developed and a brochure is produced. After editing and printing, the agenda then is mailed to all of the Center's membership for their local proactive work with legislators.

The legislative agenda is also mailed to each legislator. Further, press releases to the religious and secular press promote the agenda.

### **How does the Virginia Interfaith Center develop specific legislation to be introduced at the legislature?**

Interfaith Center staff, in consultation and collaboration with partner religious and advocacy groups assist in the selection of specific issues for which legislation is written, introduced and promoted. We do not merely react to legislation, we help create and support legislation.

### **Are there public policy issues that the Virginia Interfaith Center does not address?**

Not only do differences exist among different religious bodies on particular public policy issues, some faith communities are deeply divided within as well. The Virginia Interfaith Center directs its efforts to the public policy issues on which a general consensus exists – helping families in poverty, assisting the homeless, and ensuring children are safe and secure.

# Some Dos and Don'ts of Religious Advocacy

## DO...

- ☑ Take time to study the teachings of your particular faith group on public policy. The resources that others have developed will prove helpful. If you wish to speak on public issues from a faith perspective, it is helpful to draw on the essential teachings of your faith.
- ☑ Maintain an honest, **non-partisan** position on issues.
- ☑ Urge all members of your congregation to register to vote. Virginia is a low voter registration, low voter turnout state. Make certain that persons who cannot physically get to the polls secure an absentee ballot. Provide a number people who need transportation to the polls can call. Do not tell people how to vote, but encourage all people of faith to participate in the civic process.
- ☑ Attend the Virginia Interfaith Center candidate forums. You will be astonished at how appreciative candidates are of citizens who ask honest questions and share concerns in a sincere, non-threatening way. Listen carefully. Do candidates really answer questions or avoid making direct responses? Does the candidate have a record on the issue? Do you know the record? Do you share her or his faith?
- ☑ Linger a bit after candidate forums for a chance to engage candidates in personal conversation. Make sure they get to know you by name and by face. They are people too and are eager to meet new people.

## DON'T...

- ☒ Endorse a candidate, even if he or she is a member of your congregation.
- ☒ Distribute partisan campaign literature as part of a congregational activity. Your congregation may need to decide what its policy will be regarding granting any political organization permission to distribute campaign literature peacefully on property belonging to your congregation. A congregation may issue a ban.
- ☒ Distribute a candidate survey focused on narrowly selected issues that could appear biased.
- ☒ Distribute literature that does not include the name of the organization that produced the material.
- ☒ Invite selected candidates to address a congregational group and exclude other candidates. Make certain that all candidates for the same office receive identical invitations.
- ☒ Conduct a partisan voter registration drive.
- ☒ Distribute information you know to be untrue, violates the beliefs of your faith community, suggests partisan positions, or insults the religious beliefs of others.

# Tips for Legislative Advocacy

## Visits to Public Officials:

- Make an appointment. Be on time.
- Go with a friend or group.
- Focus on 1 or 2 issues.
- Begin with a warm introduction.
- Be brief and concise.
- Leave written materials, if available.
- Close on a positive note. Say “thank you.” (Keep the door open to future dialogue.)

## Telephone Calls to Public Officials:

- Give your name and address.
- Mention your group membership, if appropriate.
- Be brief.
- Focus on 1 issue.
- Indicate your position.
- Use the bill number, if available.
- Ask for your message to be repeated.
- Thank the secretary or aide.

## Personal Letters to Public Officials:

- Focus on 1 issue.
- Use the bill number, if any.
- Be personal. Do not use a form letter; adapt it.
- Be positive and constructive.
- Describe why you are concerned.
- Ask questions that require a response, e.g. how will he/she vote.
- Enclose information, if available.
- Write a thank you if a legislator votes with you or a polite letter of regret if he/she does not.

## Essential qualities for Advocates:

Be positive and non-partisan! Threatening or argumentative advocacy rarely works.

Be personal! Visits are better than letters. Personal letters are better than form letters. Share your experience or concern.

Be persistent! Usually it takes time. Let your values sustain you for the long haul.

## Before the Legislative Session:

- Sponsor educational sessions for groups.
- Pass out fact sheets on issues to individuals.
- Connect service projects of volunteers with the underlying social causes and issues.
- Identify your priorities for effectiveness.
- Visit legislators in your home district.
- Organize a telephone tree.

## During the Legislative Session:

- Organize a letter writing campaign on an issue.
- Act on legislative alerts from networks.
- Identify subcommittees for your priorities.
- Write or visit your legislators and subcommittee members.
- When it goes to the full committee, contact your legislator and committee members.
- Attend committee hearings. Speak or simply be visibly present and supportive of a position.
- When legislation comes to the floor for a vote, contact your legislator.
- Activate a telephone tree alert. The fast pace often makes telephone calls necessary.

## After the Legislative Session:

- Review what happened during the session.
- Share the results with individuals or groups.
- Write letters of gratitude to public officials.
- Get on mailing lists of studies on key issues.

## Tip for New Advocate:

RELAX! It is easy! You do not need to be experts! You just need share your concerns and values. You can always leave or enclose written materials. And feel free to go as a group.

# Other Methods of Communicating Your Concerns

- Speak up at a town meeting
- Legislators often schedule public meetings to update constituents and monitor constituent opinion. These meetings are a good place to raise your concerns, ask for action, and increase your knowledge of a legislator's thinking and approach.
- Call the legislator's district office and ask for dates and locations of public appearances or meetings.
- Sit near the front so that the legislator can see you when you ask a question.
- Identify yourself by name, organization, and faith group.
- Be polite and keep your comments brief. Describe your concerns and ask for a specific action.
- If the legislator does not answer your question, be assertive and ask it again.
- Take friends and members of your congregation with you to the meeting for support and to show the legislator that there is broad constituent concern.

# Tips for Writing Effective Letters to the Editors

Letters to the editor of local and statewide newspapers are a good way to express your views on an issue while also providing important information to the public. The "Letters to the Editor" section is one of the most popular sections of newspapers, assuring letter writers a wide audience for their views.

Letters render a valuable service to the public by providing information and viewpoints that might not be reported in other sections of the newspaper. Many people have not had the same kinds of experiences you have had, or may have been misinformed about these issues. Your letter can help them gain new insights, and hopefully, encourage them to take some action.

In order to be effective, a letter must be well written and focused. The following are some tips on writing effective letters to editors. These tips are also helpful in writing letters to legislators or other public officials you may ask for support on these issues.

- ✍ Think about what you want to say before you begin to write: your ideas should be clear in your own mind before you begin to put them on paper.
- ✍ Be concise! Don't try to explain everything there is about an issue. Think of what is most important to you about this issue and focus your letter on it. And remember to emphasize what action you want the reader to take--contacting their legislator, writing to the governor, etc.
- ✍ Make your letter easy to read; short sentences, short paragraphs and simple words are best. Make sure to include your name, address and phone number because they will contact letter-writers to confirm that you were the one who sent the letter.
- ✍ Keep your letter positive. It is more important to emphasize your points and what people need to do to help instead of making things more confusing.
- ✍ Don't be rude or threatening. This will often hurt your cause.
- ✍ Target your letters, especially to areas that have had little coverage on the issue. Try to imagine who will be reading your letter (farmers, urban residents, unemployed people) and think of what their particular concerns are and what arguments might be persuasive with them.
- ✍ Don't be discouraged if your letter is not printed right away, or printed at all. The larger newspapers often have more letters than they can print, or may not print more than one or two letters on a certain topic. Even if only one out of ten letters is printed, you have reached thousands of readers--enough to make your effort worthwhile.
- ✍ Remember to send letters to smaller, local papers in addition to the papers with larger circulation.
- ✍ Consider submitting your letter by email or fax so it will reach the newspaper in a more timely manner. Also, check the newspaper's website for instructions on letter submission.

# Scriptural Passages Concerning Social Justice

Amos 5:21-24 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. (NRSV)

1 John 3:17-18 How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. (NRSV)

The Holy Qur'an 76:8-9 ...they feed for the love of God the indigent, the orphan and the captive (saying): "We feed you for the sake of God alone. No reward do we desire from you nor thanks."

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

James 2:15-17 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them "Go in peace; keep warm and eat you fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily need, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (NRSV)

The Holy Qur'an 4:135 O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be rich or poor; For God can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you swerve, and if you distort justice or decline to do justice, God is well acquainted with all the you do.

Micah 6:8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (NRSV)

Matthew 25:34-36 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was in prison and you visited me." (NRSV)

The Holy Qur'an Chapter 6:90

God commands justice, the doing of good and giving to kins and forbids all indecent deeds, and evil, and rebellion: He instructs you, that you may remember.

Psalms 82:2-4 How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicket? Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

Isaiah 10:1-2 Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!

## Important Contact Information

### **For Advocacy Information:**

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Email: [office@VICPP.org](mailto:office@VICPP.org)

Web Site: [www.VICPP.org](http://www.VICPP.org)

Virginia General Assembly Web Site

<http://legis.state.va.us> (lots of information, including text and status of bills and contact information)

Who's My Legislator?

(accessible via a link from the above website and on [www.VICPP.org](http://www.VICPP.org))

<http://conview.state.va.us/whosmy/constinput.asp>

Legislative Information

(for status of bills and getting on mailing lists)

House: 804-698-1500

Senate: 804-698-7410

Bill Room

(for copies of bills/reports; see also web site)

804-786-6984

Legislative HOTLINE

Call between 8 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. to leave messages for legislators during session

(800) 889-0229

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