

WRITING TO PUBLIC OFFICIALS

What makes a good letter to lawmakers?



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Writing a letter is an effective way to communicate with your elected official. Capitol Hill offices employ staffers whose responsibility is to read and respond to constituent mail, and many of these offices start issue files after receiving merely seven letters on a topic.

Due to heightened security measures, written letters do not reach the legislator's office quickly. Email is the fastest way to reach many offices, and many staffers prefer this mode of communication and filing.

Joining the ELCA e-Advocacy Network is a convenient way to write to lawmakers. Upon signing up for the Network (www.ELCA.org/advocacy), you will begin receiving emails on timely and relevant legislative issues. These emails include action opportunity links that allow you to send an email to your elected officials with a few clicks. The sample letters are always editable—you can personalize these letters to include stories about your community or your experience in ministry, connecting the policy issue to very real experience. You can also use the subject of these emails from the ELCA e-Advocacy Network to organize your congregation, seminary, or college group to write letters.

Tips for writing letters

- Write your legislator. Your voice is most powerful in the office of your member of Congress.
- Correctly address the officials according to their appropriate body of Congress and their title. Be certain his or her name is spelled correctly.
- Identify yourself as a constituent and format your letter to include your address (even when emailing).
- State your purpose for writing in the first sentence of the letter. (*"As your constituent and member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I am writing to urge your support for increased funding for X."*) If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it. Make sure that you are referencing the correct legislation to the correct body of Congress.
- Address only one issue or piece of legislation in each letter. If you are concerned about more than one issue, write more than one letter.

- Understand the legislator's involvement with and stance on the issue. If he or she has been supportive on this issue, express your appreciation, urge them to continue and offer yourself as a resource. If he or she has been indifferent, urge them to take action. If he or she disagrees with you on the issue, explain your personal connection and why you—as their constituent living in a community he or she represents—are taking action.
- Close your letter with a restatement of your purpose and indicate the response that you would like them to take.
- Bring this issue home. All politics is local, and do your best to make a case for why this issue matters to you (the member's constituent) and your community (the member's constituency). Do your very best to convince the person reading the letter why this issue matters to constituents who this legislators represents.
- If you receive a response from the legislator's office—especially within two to three weeks—send a thank you letter. Acknowledge the response, briefly reiterate your purpose, and urge further support.
- Continue to reach out to the legislator's office and work to build a relationship.

This address format can be used in email messages, as well as those sent through the Postal Service:

To Your Senator:

The Honorable (full name)
 (Room #) (Name) Senate Office Building
 United States Senate
 Washington, D.C. 20510

Senator (last name),

To Your Representative:

The Honorable (full name)
 (Room #) (Name) House Office Building
 United States House of Representatives
 Washington, D.C. 20515

Representative (last name),

A sample letter to Congress:

April 1, 2013

The Honorable John Martin
731 Hart Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Senator Martin,

As your constituent and a member of Zion Lutheran Church in Iowa City, I urge you to increase funding above fiscal year 2013 levels for poverty-focused international development, humanitarian assistance, and global health and child nutrition programs within the State and Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill.

In my congregation, we regularly address global poverty issues by giving to ELCA World Hunger, our church's response to hunger and poverty (and the underlying causes). We also educate our youth in Sunday School on Christ's commitment to all vulnerable people, and, through our church's synod, we support a companion synod in Tanzania. And, through the support of ELCA World Hunger, Lutherans around the world initiate a tremendous amount of disaster relief, support for local and regional food systems, and community sustainability.

But this life-saving work cannot succeed without a robust U.S. commitment to address poverty.

As you and your colleagues mark up the fiscal year 2013 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill tomorrow and vote on the bill later this week, I strongly urge you to increase funding for these international poverty-focused development assistance lifelines that bring new hope to impoverished yet resilient communities around the world and contribute to a more stable and secure world for all people.

Thank you for your continued dedication and support to international poverty-focused foreign assistance, even amidst this challenging political climate. Lutherans believe government can be a gift to help advance the common good. Please know that my congregation in Iowa City prays for you and all public officials.

Sincerely,

Jane Smith

101 North Oak Street
Iowa City, Iowa
52240