



**Making contact with your  
elected representative**



## Making contact with your elected representative

### How to write to your MP (and other elected representatives)

Imagine the scenario. You have heard about an issue which concerns you as a Christian. It might be a local matter, a proposed change to the law, or the actions of a government department. What can you do about it?

As a citizen, it is your right to contact your elected political representatives. As a Christian, it is your responsibility to use this right in a wise and Godly way. Some people feel that they are too small and insignificant to make a difference, but in fact individual opinions can and do affect the political process, especially when many voices rise up together on the same issue.

### WHY SHOULD I BOTHER TO CONTACT MY ELECTED REPRESENTATIVE?

Because they are ready to listen and respond to those who live in their constituencies. Responding to the concerns of the people who have elected them is a key part of any political representative's role. Most of them take this duty seriously, and allocate part of their time to dealing with the correspondence they receive. They frequently use the letters they receive to judge the strength and direction of public opinion on issues. If the matter is of wider concern, your elected representative can also take it on to the relevant authority such as a Department of State or other official body.

Because Christians have a duty to influence government, both as citizens of a democracy and as ambassadors for Christ. We are called to be 'salt and light' in our communities, acting as witnesses to biblical values and 'loving our neighbour' on a corporate as well as an individual level. Sometimes the only effective way to tackle issues of unrighteousness or injustice is to try and influence the political process directly – in person.

Because it works! Sometimes people ask, 'does contacting parliamentarians really work?' MPs can help with all kinds of personal and community issues, and they have power to influence national legislation. Many MPs have said that they 'vote with their postbag' on issues of conscience which they themselves do not hold a strong view on. This is democracy at work, and it provides a wonderful opportunity for Christians to shape the law. For example, during the passage of the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill in 2006, many Christians lobbied against clauses that could have restricted freedom of speech and freedom to preach the gospel for fear of 'offending' others. Despite victories in the House of Lords, MPs seemed certain to let the legislation pass. However the

*We have a group of Nuns in our constituency who invite my boss to a garden party every summer. My boss is always touched by their generosity of spirit and their gentle but firm insistence that they will pray for her and asking for any requests. As a consequence, she is always ready to read their letters at other times with an open and receptive frame of mind. Build a positive relationship with your local representative and they will always be happier to help. It's also an excellent way of reflecting Jesus!*

MP's Parliamentary Assistant

Government lost by one vote. On the 31st January 2006 MPs voted by 288 votes to 278 then by 283 to 282 to back two key amendments to the bill, which were aimed at securing freedom of speech. At least one MP decided in the day before the vote to abstain following a phone call from a respected Christian constituent. Another example of the power of letter writing can be seen in the Jubilee Debt campaign, in which concerted Christian pressure helped to change government policy regarding the debt of developing nations.

## **WHO SHOULD I WRITE TO?**

Government is divided up with elected representatives having different areas of responsibility at local council, regional, national, and European level:

- Local Councillors deal with local issues like roads, schools, rubbish collection, planning, and community facilities;
- MPs deal with national issues like changes to the law, foreign policy, taxation, and national policy in areas such as health, education, and welfare.
- Assembly Members/MSPs in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and London deal with issues that primarily affect their own areas.
- MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) scrutinise the work of the European Union, including proposals for new European laws.

A fuller description of the role of each type of representative is included at the end of this document (Appendix A: 'Who does what?').

## **HOW CAN I CONTACT THEM, AND HOW SHOULD I COMMUNICATE WITH THEM?**

How to write to your MP, MEP or Councillor

First, find out who your elected representatives are by logging onto the brilliant My Society websites: [www.writetothem.com](http://www.writetothem.com) and simply enter your postcode. To see how your elected representatives have voted in the past, go to: [www.theyworkforyou.com](http://www.theyworkforyou.com).

MP's can also be contacted through the official parliament website at <http://findyourmp.parliament.uk>, or by telephoning the House of Commons on 0207 219 3000. However, before calling your MP directly by phone, it is best to initiate contact by writing a letter or sending an e-mail in which you can explain your issue.

Individual letters are more effective than mass postcard campaigns. A personal, carefully planned letter is most likely to attract an MP's attention. Sadly many MPs still receive letters from irate people who have not been bothered to properly investigate the issue at hand or to consider how the MP may be able to help. Here are a few tips:

- If possible limit the letter to one side of A4.
- Research the issue thoroughly, using statistics and other evidence.

- Explain the issue clearly and concisely.
- Be as specific as you can. MPs do sometimes have a reputation for deflecting the question away from what you asked and answering the one they would have preferred you to ask! Ask them for specific actions, such as expressing their support for your campaign, writing a letter on your behalf, or telling you how they intend to vote on an issue. If they are basically supportive, challenge them to do more.
- Unless it directly involves a theological or academic issue, try to avoid using explicitly religious language. Do not use extensive quotes from Bible, as this can put the recipient off from engaging with you.

***In our office we have one constituent who writes fairly frequently, ranting about the state of the nation and impending judgement. This type of letter does not influence the MP, as it does not raise any specific issue or engage with him. The letters quote long Bible passages about judgement day and how the government is evil and destroying the nation. 'Christian' letters that rant at an MP can actually alienate them from other Christians who are trying to engage with them.***

MP's Office Manager

- Give personal testimony or experiences relating to the issue.
- Above all, be polite and respectful at all times. Ensure the letter is written with love, being positive and encouraging wherever possible. Harsh and abrasive letters do not have the same effect as humble and respectful ones. As a Christian, communicating to an elected representative means being gracious. Regardless of the issue at hand, letting them know that you value their public service, and that you are praying for them and their family can be really encouraging and provide a good basis from which to build a long term relationship.
- Build a positive relationship with your MP (whether they are a Christian or not). Remember that the issue can remain current for quite a long time, and you may want to write to them again later. For example: a Bill has to go through several stages before it becomes law, and a campaign will have different points to make at each Parliamentary stage
- Remember, your MP is your 'representative'. They are not your delegate, and they have a right to their own opinion. If they disagree with you on an issue do not let this become a bar to working with them on other issues.
- MPs are expected to respond to all letters from their constituents, but heavy caseloads can often delay replies - so, be patient. Many will not respond unless you live in their constituency, so it is important to go through your own local MP. Don't write directly to the Prime Minister or Secretary of State (unless they happen to be your MP). It is much better to ask your MP to write to the relevant minister on your behalf, because government ministers are obliged to respond to letters from MPs.

- A handwritten letter is seen as having taken more time and preparation, so is often given more weight than e-mail. But e-mails and social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter are increasingly being used by MPs to stay in touch.

*The most uplifting letters that we have from Christian correspondents are when they seek to encourage the MP in his work and his calling, to praise him for something that he has done well, or to let him know that they are praying for him.*

MP's office staff

- Follow up your letter with a response to their letter. Once an MP has written a reply they move onto other issues; so write back in response to their letter and keep it in their mind.
- Get your friends to write about the issue as well, as the more letters an MP gets about a subject the more likely they are to do something about it.

### **How to address your letters**

For local councillors, letters can be addressed to the Council offices. You will be able to find this information in local directories or on your Council's website.

For MPs, letters should be addressed to:

Name of your MP  
House of Commons  
Westminster  
London  
SW1A 0AA

Letters should begin Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms Name, and be signed "Yours Sincerely" (this is true for all levels of representative). If your MP has been a Privy Counsellor, they are addressed as Rt Hon (Name) MP. You can confirm if this is the case on their website (but don't let it put you off writing if you are not sure!).

The same basic rules apply to other elected representatives too. Use [www.writetothem.com](http://www.writetothem.com) to find out the correct address and the right person for your local area.

### **How to meet with your MP**

If you find face-to-face contact easier than expressing yourself in writing, or if you feel a need to press your point home, there are a number of different ways to meet with your MP in person.

- At their surgery: MPs run regular advice surgeries within their constituencies. Even the busiest MPs are keen to hear from constituents (voters) and you make an appointment to arrange a meeting via the constituency office or through the Westminster office. You should aim to keep any meeting with your MP brief, keep your points concise and keep your manners polite. If possible, aim to

present all your points on one side of A4, and try to take up no more than 15 minutes of the MP's time.

- At a campaigning event: Sometimes Christian charities run mass lobby events in Parliament to give you the chance to contact your MP.
- Run your own event: Inviting your MP to an event at your church is an excellent way to hear their views 'live and unplugged'. Often local newspapers and media are interested in getting along to these kind of events, which can be a good way highlighting your concerns and raising your church's profile locally.
- Election hustings: You can get along to a local election debate / hustings evening, many of which take place in church buildings. Organisations such as CARE and Evangelical Alliance provide excellent resources to help churches run a hustings event at election time. These are great opportunities for Christians to question the candidates vying to become the next MP.
- At parliament: MPs are always keen to meet groups of constituents in Westminster on a particular issue. But give plenty of notice in order to get into an MP's busy diary.

As with writing a letter, it's vital to prepare and brief yourself before meeting with your MP. Also, after the meeting it is beneficial to write a letter of thanks that includes the details of the discussion and any decisions that were made.

### **What if my MP/elected representative doesn't reply to my letter?**

If you get no reply within 28 days, or receive an unsatisfactory response from your representative, don't give up! You might like to consider one of the following options:

1. Every constituent has a right to 'Green Card' their MP in Parliament by visiting Westminster in person and filling out a meeting request card at Central Lobby. It should be noted however, that MPs have busy Westminster diaries. Green Carding can be seen as somewhat impolite and is a last resort (and it does not always result in a meeting).
2. You could make direct contact with the relevant central or local Government department.
3. You can contact your local Citizens Advice Bureau for advice.
4. You can write a letter to your other representatives using [www.writetothem.com](http://www.writetothem.com).
5. You can write a letter to your local newspaper about your issue, and your dissatisfaction with your MP, MEP or councillor.

*We once had someone write in complaining about the quality of the toilet paper in the town hall, and he enclosed said piece of offending toilet paper! (thankfully unused).*

MP Office Manager

6. You can use PledgeBank (made by My Society who also made WriteToThem) to gather a group of people with the same issue as you, and solve the problem together

## **appendix a: who does what?**

### **MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT (MPS)**

Your MP will be able to help you with such areas as:

- Tax matters that relate to HM Revenue & Customs (but not council tax).
- Problems with the Department of Work and Pensions such as benefits, pensions and national insurance, (but not the social services department of your local authority). If you live in England matters dealt with by the Department of Health such as hospitals and the National Health Service. • Problems dealt with by the Home Office such as immigration.
- If you live in England your MP can help with school closures and grants which are the responsibility of the Department for Children, Schools and Families. However, day to day problems involving schools are the responsibility of governors and your local education authority. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the devolved institutions are responsible for education matters.
- Your MP is responsible for listening to the views and concerns of constituents and organisations in the constituency (e.g. businesses, charities, schools etc.) on issues affected by national Government policy, and raising those concerns with the Government and Ministers.

An MP is not just a representative of his or her constituents. They also performs an extremely important role as a law-maker (or 'legislator'). This role involves:

- Voting to approve or reject new laws (or amendments to laws);
- Scrutinising proposed laws;
- Holding the Government to account by questioning Ministers on Government policy;
- Sitting on committees which examine major issues ('Select Committees') or the detail of proposed legislation ('Standing Committees'.) Your MP cannot help in private disputes with other individuals, nor can they help with regard to faulty goods, nor can they interfere with decisions made by courts.

Your MP will rarely be the person ultimately responsible for the issue you raise with them, so make your communications polite and be clearly focussed on the issues rather than appearing to blame them for everything! They are there to be your champion and your last course of action.

### **LOCAL COUNCILLORS**

Councillors have differing responsibilities depending on which council area you live in.

In England you may have two levels of council: County and District, in which case their responsibilities are divided as follows:

- District Councillors: You may have one or more District Councillors. They tend to deal with issues around council housing, planning, rubbish collection, the local environment, and the administration of elections.
- County Councillors: You may have one or more County Councillors. They tend to deal with education, transport and roads, fire and social services plus libraries.

Otherwise, you will have only one level of council, whose responsibilities differ depending on exactly where you live but will cover most or all of the above.

The Department of Communities and Local Government is the Central Government department responsible for local Government:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/>

The Direct Gov website has a search function to enable you to find your local council

<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DI1/Directories/Localcouncils/index.htm>

#### **MEMBERS OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: MEPS**

If you have a question about proposed European directives (laws), the European Parliament, the European Commission or the European Union, your MEPs may be able to help. Once passed, EU laws become the responsibility of national governments and parliaments to implement, whereupon it passes to your MP to contact the various EU bodies on your behalf.

For more information you could go to Care for Europe, who have many years experience of representing Christian views to the European Institutions:

[www.careforeurope.org](http://www.careforeurope.org).

Also, the European Commission and the European Parliament also have specific Information Offices within the UK –and <http://ec.europa.eu/unitedkingdom> and [www.europarl.org.uk](http://www.europarl.org.uk).

#### **MEMBERS OF THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT: MSPS**

MSPs deal with 'devolved matters' including; health, education and training, local government, social work, housing, planning, tourism, economic development and financial assistance to industry. The Scottish Parliament is also responsible for some aspects of transport policy, including the Scottish road network, bus policy and ports and harbours, law and home affairs, including most aspects of criminal and civil law, the prosecution system and the courts, the police and fire services. Finally, MSPs are also responsible for environment policy, natural and built heritage, agriculture, forestry and fishing, sport and the arts. The parliament is based at Holyrood in Edinburgh.

### **WELSH ASSEMBLY MEMBERS: AMS**

AMs are responsible for; agriculture, fisheries, forestry and rural development, ancient monuments and historic buildings, culture, economic development, education and training, environment, fire and rescue services and promotion of fire safety, food, health and health services, highways and transport, housing, local government, public administration, social welfare, sport and recreation, tourism, town and county planning, water and flood defence and the Welsh language. The parliament is based in Cardiff.

### **LONDON ASSEMBLY MEMBERS: LAMS**

The Greater London Assembly's main areas of responsibility are: transport, policing, fire and emergency planning, economic development, planning, culture, environment and health. You can find details at [www.london.gov.uk](http://www.london.gov.uk). The Assembly is based near Tower Bridge, London.

### **NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY MEMBERS: MLAS**

The Assembly has authority to legislate in a field of competences known as 'transferred matters'. These matters include health and education but criminal law and police are 'reserved', this means that these powers are still held by Central Government. The Assembly is based at Stormont, Belfast.



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