



# THE ADVOCATE'S TOOLBOX

How to influence policy  
get your message into the media  
and build a relationship with your Members of Congress



# **ST. COLUMBAN MISSION**

## **FOR JUSTICE, PEACE AND ECOLOGY**

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# What our faith has to say about politics

When Pope Francis [addressed a joint session](#) of the United States Congress in September of 2015, this is how he described politics: "Politics is an expression of our compelling need to live as one, in order to build as one, the greatest common good."

He went on to say that "all political activity must serve and promote the good of the human person and be based on respect for his or her dignity."

"Politics" has become a dirty word in our national discourse, but the Pope's speech reminds us that politics is not about wielding power, advancing an ideology, or enriching yourself.

What politics is truly about is deciding how we want to live in community with each other. In other words, politics is one way we put into practice our responsibility to act as each other's keeper (cf. [Gen 4:9](#)). Every person of faith has a responsibility to participate in the political life of his or her community.

Our model for this is the first apostles, who devoted themselves to the welfare of their community. Scripture tells us that they had all things in common. They would sell their property and possessions and divide them among every member according to each

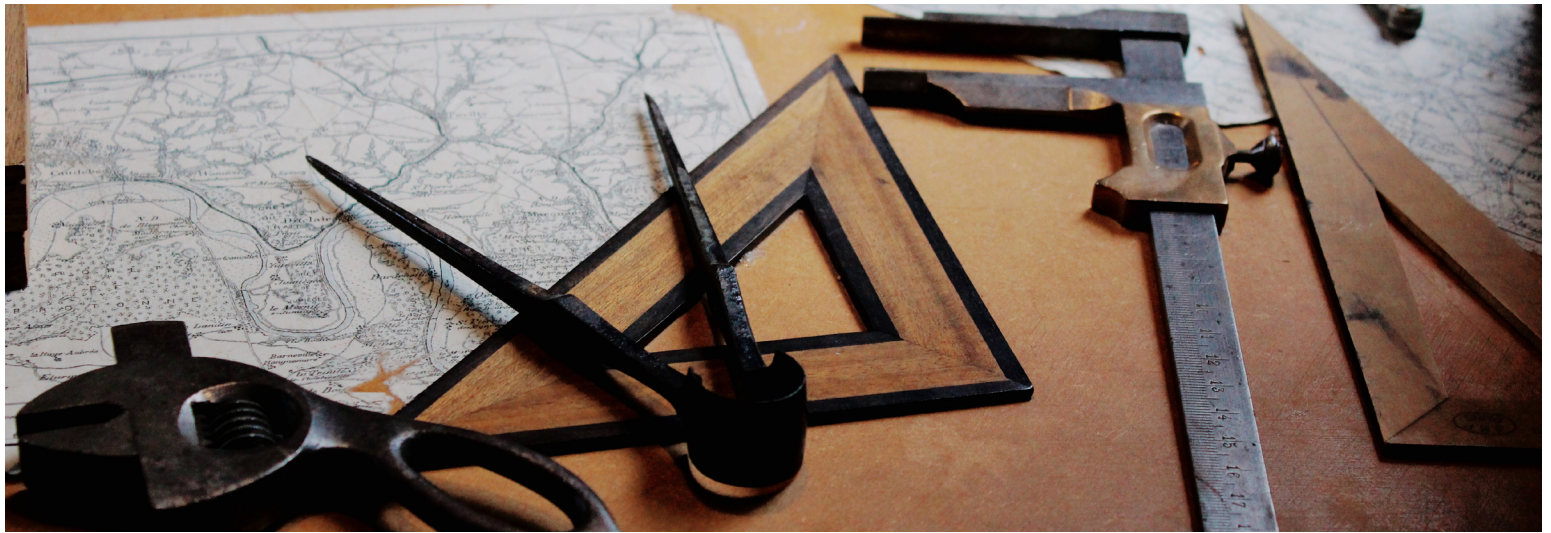
one's need ([Acts 2: 42-45](#)).

Of course, we live in a different time and place than the early apostles, but even though the specifics of our politics is different today, our goal is the same as their: to create a community where everyone looks after each other, and especially looks after those who are marginalized and/or living in poverty.

Does our society live up to this ideal? Do our government's policies enable justice and promote the common good? If not, then we must challenge the structural causes of injustice. We must work to change policies that perpetuate this injustice and implement alternatives that uphold human dignity and care for our common home.

As Pope Francis challenged Congress and all of us, let us resolve now to live as nobly and as justly as possible, to educate others not to turn their back on their "neighbors" and everything around them.

Let us "take up the task of serving the common good with joy and hope" ([USCCB, Faithful Citizenship](#)). A more just world is possible, but it is only possible if each of us gets involved! ●



# How to use this advocacy toolbox

In this resource, you will learn how to use a number of advocacy “tools,” which will help you participate effectively in the political process. But what is advocacy?

Advocacy is an activity by an individual or a group that aims to influence decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions. It means engaging with those institutions to ensure that they uphold our faith’s values: respect for the dignity of every person, justice for those who are marginalized and/or living in poverty, and care for the natural world.

In other words, advocacy is putting our faith into action!

Specifically, the tools in this toolbox will help you:

1. influence policies and decisions on an issue you care about,
2. get your message out into the media,
3. and build a relationship with your Members of Congress.

And your Members of Congress do want to hear from you.

The [Congressional Management Foundation](#) conducted a survey which found that 94% of congressional staffers said **“in-person visits from constituents would have some or a lot of influence on an undecided lawmaker.”**

Why? Because you have stories, data, and experiences about issues that they might not have.

In the same survey, 91% of congressional staffers said it would be helpful to have “information about the impact a bill/issue would have on the district or state.” However, only 9% report that they receive that information from their constituents frequently!

What’s more, 79% of staffers said a personal story from a constituent related to the bill or issue would be helpful, but only 18% report that they receive that frequently!

The tools in this toolbox will help you to close this gap between what’s happening in our communities around the country and what’s happening in our nation’s capital.

You can use them during any time of year on any issue, but an especially great time to put this resource into practice is during the “August recess.”

Every August, Members of Congress go back to their districts and states for a full month in order to touch base with their constituents and learn what they care about. As a result, in August there are many opportunities for you to meet with your representatives in-person, interact with them on social media, and invite them to community forums.

Always remember: you DO NOT need to be an “expert” in the issue(s) you care about in order to have an impact. Your story – your personal experience with the issue and your community’s experience with the issue – is what’s most important.

Be sure to involve your family, friends, and colleagues in your advocacy too!

If there is a local group that cares about an issue that you care about, join them and ask about implementing this toolbox together. (Maybe you’re already part of such a group.) You could also see if your family, friends, or faith community would do the same. Advocating as part of group will double your influence.

If you have any questions about this toolbox, or how to put the tools into action, please feel free to contact the St. Columban Mission for Justice, Peace and Ecology (aka, Columban JPE) at [jpeprograms@columban.org](mailto:jpeprograms@columban.org). We can support you in your advocacy efforts and walk you through the process. ●

# Advocate Profile



“Our community is driven by faith and moral values. We understand the importance of helping those who suffer and are vulnerable - just like the Gospel asks us to. Faith-based advocacy organizations have been at the forefront, leading the way to protect the most vulnerable.”

-Cynthia, Columban Advocacy Fellow  
*visiting her Members of Congress*



# How to tell your story for advocacy

Stories are one of the most valuable political tools we have.

Stories connect us to other people, they help us understand an issue, they motivate us into action, and they make the abstract concrete.

Effective storytelling will raise awareness, change hearts and minds, mobilize others, and influence policy.

How can you use your story?

- You can share with it your Members of Congress when you meet with them in-person.
- You can share it at a town hall or on social media.
- You can make it the basis for a “letter to the editor.”

You can use your story in a variety of ways. Get creative!

The worksheet on the next page will help you identify and structure your advocacy story. You may want to print out the worksheet so you can fill it in by hand. Or you can type directly onto the PDF.



## Why Storytelling?

**Effective Advocacy:** stories foster connection between people, help them understand the issue, and motivate people to become advocates.

**Individual Empowerment:** storytelling recognizes and respects the expertise of those who have experienced injustice and helps them develop their own sense of power.

**Influence Public Narratives:** storytelling ensures that there are a diversity of voices in public debates. Stories can also combat negative rhetoric and stereotypes.

*Tip: You don't have just one story. You have as many stories as you have issues that you care about! •*

# Crafting Your Story for Advocacy Worksheet

## Pro-Tips

- Don't be afraid to weave data into your story.
- Situate your story in the context of the larger issue.
- Keep your story tightly focused and avoid tangents.
- Motivate your audience with hope.

## Crafting Your Story

*Answer the following questions in one or two concise sentences.*

1. What is the issue I want to address?
2. What is the rhetorical purpose of my presentation? Do I want to persuade, inform, etc.?
3. What outcome would I like from my audience?
4. What powerful examples do I have that I am willing to share?
5. What creative wording or "hook" will I use to get my audience's attention?
6. What solutions or suggestions for my issue will I give my audience?
7. How will I close?

## Practicing Your Story Out Loud

Once you have crafted your story for advocacy and feel comfortable with your answers to the questions above, practice telling your story out loud and without looking at your notes.

Practice by yourself at first if you need to, but it is also important to get feedback as you become more comfortable. Ask a few trusted friends or colleagues to listen to your story to offer constructive feedback.



# How to have a meeting with your Members of Congress

Meeting in-person with your Members of Congress is an important way to build a relationship with them and hold them accountable. It is also an important way for you to bring them information and experiences on an issue that they might not have, like we discussed in “How to use this advocacy toolbox” on page 3.

Before your meeting, you will need to identify personalized and local information. Your representatives want to know how a bill, or an issue, affects their district or state. They also want personal stories from a constituent related to that bill or issue.

*Tip: In addition to meeting with your representatives in person, you can also call their offices, send them letters or emails, and engage with them on social media. We cover some of these tools in “Other ways to engage your Members of Congress” on page 14.*

To help you have the most effective in-person meeting with your representatives, in this section you will find three worksheets.

- **Member of Congress Research Worksheet:** This worksheet will help you gather some basic information about your representatives (i.e., party affiliation, committee appointments,

etc.), as well as where they stand on your issue.

- **Meeting Preparation Worksheet:** This worksheet will help you prepare for your meeting by guiding you through the process of requesting an appointment, preparing your meeting agenda, etc.
- **Meeting Outline Worksheet:** This worksheet gives you a meeting “outline” or “script” that you can use to guide your conversation with your representatives. If you’re going with a group, you can assign individuals different roles for during the conversation.

Before your meeting, there are a few things you’ll want to do.

1. Decide how you want the meeting to go and agree upon this with your group. Our “Meeting Preparation Worksheet” will help with this.
2. Decide on your desired outcome. Do you want to simply introduce yourself and your issue to your representatives? Do you want them to take a particular action, like make a statement about your issue or co-



sponsor a piece of legislation?

3. Reflect on a personal story about your issue. You can use a story about your community too. See "How to tell your story for advocacy" on page 5 for how to identify and effectively structure your advocacy story.
4. Contact the district or capital office to get contact information for the Scheduler, who will set up the meeting between you and the representative, or the appropriate staffer if the representative is not available.
5. Meet with your group and practice your talking points out loud. Our "Meeting Outline Worksheet" will help with this.

*Tip: You DO NOT need to be an "expert" in the issue(s) you care about in order to have an impact. Your story – your personal experience with the issue and your community's experience with the issue – is what's most important.*

# Advocate Profile



"When I think of advocacy, I'm reminded of the Holy Spirit. Before Jesus left this world, he told his friends that he would not leave them orphans. Instead he promised, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to help you and be with you forever" ([Jn 14:16](#)). The disciples recognized the Holy Spirit as the Advocate. To advocate is to stand next to someone who is in a vulnerable position, to speak on their behalf, and to plead their cause. The Holy Spirit pleads our cause whenever we encounter difficulties and trials, and we are called to do the same for those who find themselves in a vulnerable position in the world around us."

-Fr. Tim, Columban Priest  
visiting his Member of Congress

# Member of Congress Research Worksheet

1. Find out who your elected officials are at [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) and [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov).
2. Visit their websites.
3. Look at past statement (these can be found on their website, their committee's website, or through googling) to see where they stand on your issue.
4. Find them on Facebook and Twitter to see what they have and have not been posting about.
5. Follow them on Facebook and Twitter.
6. Identify out some basic information.

- *Party Affiliation*
  
- *Faith Affiliation*
  
- *Committee Membership*
  
- *Stated Values*
  
- *When are they up for re-election*
  
- *Their position on your issue*

7. Which current bills are relevant to your issue? How did your Member vote on those bills?  
(Each bulleted line below is for you to note one bill, one vote. If you have more bills/votes than bullets lines, feel free to add them in the space underneath.)

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

# Meeting Preparation Worksheet

## Request An Appointment

- Contact the Scheduler in your Congressperson's office to make an appointment with your Member, or the staffer who handles your issue if your Member is not available.
- Tell the Scheduler the dates you are available, the issue you will discuss, and who will be present during the visit. Follow up with a call to get a date. Be persistent.
- Confirm the visit by phone/email a day or two before the appointment.

## Prepare for the Visit

- Know something about your Congressperson's likely position on the issue. Fill out our "Member of Congress Research Worksheet" to help you identify this information.
- Review background information on the issue and any current, specific legislation relating to it.
- Prepare a short, written summary of your position to leave with the office.
- Contact the [St. Columban Mission for Justice, Peace and Ecology](#) if you would like support during this process.

## Make a Plan for the Visit

- Choose a spokesperson to start the visit.
- Decide who will say what. Fill out our "Meeting Outline Worksheet" to help you with this and the previous step.
- Think of questions and counter arguments that may come up and plan possible responses.
- Practice the visit.

## Make the Visit

- Explain who you are and why you are there.
- Connect with the Congressperson by expressing appreciation for something s/he has done.
- Be polite and firm in explaining the issue you want to address, and the solution. Avoid criticism.
- Use examples from your personal experiences, or your community's experiences.
- Bring the conversation back to your message if it goes off track.

- Ask what the Member's position is on the issue or bill. Ask what it would take to get her/him to support the issue or bill.
- Ask for specific action (e.g., co-sponsor a bill, speak on the issue, vote for a bill, etc.).
- If the Member already supports your position on the issue or bill, ask her/him for ways that you (or your group) could support her/his work in Congress.
- Record key points of the conversation and questions you can't answer. Volunteer to find out information you don't know and get back to your Member of Congress. It's okay not to know something! It provides the perfect excuse to follow up after the meeting.
- Leave a short, written summary of your position.

## **Follow Up on the Visit**

- Write a thank you note to your Congressperson with a summary of your conversation.
- Send the answer to any questions you said you'd research.
- Continue the dialogue with your Member of Congress and her/his staff. See "Other ways to engage with your Members of Congress" on page 14 for more information on this.

# Meeting Outline Worksheet

Member: \_\_\_\_\_  
Staffer: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date/Time of Visit: \_\_\_\_\_  
Office Location: \_\_\_\_\_

## 1. Meeting Participant Roles

Initial Spokesperson: \_\_\_\_\_  
Note Taker: \_\_\_\_\_

*Tip: Say something positive about the Member at the beginning of the visit. Explain the reason for your visit.*

### Other people making this visit

*Tip: Each person should introduce themselves - their name, where they live, if they are a constituent. Name any groups you represent (like your church or community group) and tell them how many people are involved in each.*

Manager/Timekeeper: \_\_\_\_\_  
*Tip: Don't let the Member/staffer take the conversation off track.*

Speaker 1: \_\_\_\_\_  
What will they talk about?

Speaker 2: \_\_\_\_\_  
What will they talk about?

Speaker 3: \_\_\_\_\_  
What will they talk about?

*Tip: Tell a personal story that connects you with the issue.*

## 2. About the Issue

**Bill Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Bill Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Issue:** \_\_\_\_\_

**What do we want the Member to do?:** \_\_\_\_\_

*Tip: Ask for a specific action.*

Thank the Member/staffer for their time and consideration.

## 3. Follow Up

**Who will write the thank you note:** \_\_\_\_\_

**What additional information needs to be sent to the Member/staffer?**

**What is your next step for developing your relationship with your Member?**

*Tip: See "Other ways to engage with your Members of Congress" on page 14 for more information on this.*



## Other ways to engage your Members of Congress

Meeting in-person with your Members of Congress is the first step towards building a relationship with them. There are many other tools you can use to engage with them both offline and online.

Like in-person meetings, these tools are ways we can hold our representatives accountable to the needs of our communities. They also reinforce the message of our in-person meeting, signaling to our representatives that their constituents care deeply about a specific issue.

We recommend that after you meet in-person with your representatives, you also engage them with at least two of these four tools, each time about the same issue.

We also recommend that you use these tools in conjunction with other people. This will make your action more impactful. For example, if you attend a town hall, go with a group and coordinate what issue(s) you're going to talk about. If you're tweeting at your representatives, tweet in coordination with others around the same time on the same issue.



### Call their office

While it's unlikely that you'll be able to speak to your representatives over the phone, their staffers do record each call, especially if there is a high volume of calls about a certain issue. Each week, staffers give their Member of Congress a call log in order to keep them up-to-date on what constituents are calling about.

When you call, the front-desk person will typically pick up. You can ask to speak to the appropriate staffer depending on the issue you're calling about. For example, if you want to discuss climate change, there will be a staffer in the office who handles that issue. You can also call to ask for the representative's position on an issue.

Generally, you'll want to call your Member of Congress' DC office if you want to discuss an issue, but you can call their district office if you already know a staffer who works there.

*Tip: Calling is like a meeting in-person - you DO NOT need to be an "expert" in the issue(s) you care about in order to have an impact.*

If the staffer you're on the phone with asks you a question that you do not have the answer to, tell him/her that you will find out the answer and get back to him/her. Ask for his/her email address so you can follow up.

Here is a sample script you can use when you call.

*"Hello. My name is [name] and I'm your constituent from [city]. As a person of faith and [other relevant affinity], I support [issue]. I am calling to urge the [Senator/ Representative] to support [issue]."*



## Attend town halls

When Members of Congress are on recess, especially the August recess, they usually organize town halls. A town hall is an event at which a politician or public official answers questions from members of the public. Asking questions and sharing your story at a town hall is one of the most effective ways to inform your Members of Congress.

You can find out if your representatives have scheduled a town hall in your area by visiting [www.townhallproject.com](http://www.townhallproject.com) or check your representative's website and social media for town hall announcements.

If your representatives have no town halls scheduled, call their district office(s) and let them know that you expect them to hold town holds or other public events with their constituents.



## Invite them to your community

Inviting your Members of Congress to come to your local community is often the best way to educate them about the needs of your community.

You can invite them to attend your faith community's weekly worship service or attend a special event. For example, if

your church is having a ceremony for the installation of its new solar panels or you're having a lecture or workshop about an issue your church cares about.

Generally, you will want to send your invitation to the Member's Scheduler in her/his district office. Keep the invitation to a page or less and try to get a prominent member of your community (for example, your pastor) to sign the letter. Each representative's office has a preference for how requests should be submitted, so call the office first and ask how they would like to receive the invitation.

You can find a sample invitation and a sample follow up script [here](#).



## Engage with them on social media

Almost all Members of Congress are on social media, and especially Twitter. Tweeting at your representatives is an effective way to get their attention. But before you tweet at them, you should follow their profiles. This gives your messages more credibility.

*Tip: Some Members of Congress have two twitter profiles, a personal one and a Congressional one. Usually their name on their Congressional profile will include the prefix "Rep." or "Congressman." You will want to follow their Congressional profile.*

Even though most representatives have a staffer managing their social media profiles, like with phone calls, that staffer will give the representative a "log" of what people are tweeting about and how often.

So when should you tweet at your representatives?

- You can send them a thank you tweet after you meet in-person with them or their staffers.
- You can comment on a vote they've made in Congress or a press statement they've released.



- You can send them a message about a certain issue on an important occasion. For example, on Earth Day you can tweet at them about an environmental issue.

Tweeting in coordination with others is a great way to increase the likelihood of the representative noticing your tweets, and it doesn't take many people – three or four different people tweeting at around the same time on the same issue is sometimes all you need, especially for Representatives who have fewer constituents than Senators.

If you do not have a twitter account, you can send your representatives a postcard with your message. If you do have a twitter account, you do not need to be a prolific tweeter for your account to have credibility. We do recommend that you include your Congressional district or state in your profile bio, so it's clear to your representatives that you're their constituent.

*Tip: If you don't want to create a Twitter profile, you can use this strategy on Facebook.* •

## Advocate Profile



"In order for an idea to become a reality, you need to enact change and that starts within our communities. We are the voice to the voiceless and that is why I use my voice to call my representatives in order to make that change happen."

-Kimberlee, Columban Intern  
calling her Member of Congress



# How to write a “letter to the editor”

A letter-to-the-editor (or, LTE) is a reader response to a news item ran by a media outlet. Writing LTEs to your local or regional media outlets is an effective way to reach a large audience, since the editorial page is one of the most read sections. Also, elected officials at the federal and local levels monitor local media (including LTEs) in order to keep track of what their constituents care about.

In short, an LTE is a great way to get your representatives’ attention and influence the public narrative about an issue.

If the outlet doesn’t have a word maximum, an ideal word count is 150 - 250 words.

**Keep it original.** Write from your unique perspective – you can even include portions of the advocacy story you developed using the worksheet on page 6. And, of course, do not plagiarize.

**Mentions officials by name.** Even though Members of Congress do monitor local media, mentioning them by name in your LTE will ensure that they see it. Stick to commenting about their voting record, press releases, or other official activities. You can also encourage them to take a specific action, like co-sponsoring a bill. Always keep your comments respectful!

**Consider alternative engagement.** Even if the outlet doesn’t publish your LTE, there are other ways to get your message out there. If you watch or listen to a news show that solicits viewer responses, consider sending yours. See if your local news outlets or reporters are on social media and share your LTE’s content with them there.



## Some General Tips

**Be timely.** Aim to send your LTE to the editor one or two days after the article you’re responding was published.

**Follow the outlet’s guidelines.** Check the outlet’s LTE/opinion section for any unique rules or conventions they may want your LTE to follow. Some outlets have a word maximum for LTEs.

**Keep it short.** Outlets often cut LTEs that they feel run long. Since its possible they’ll cut your main point, it’s best to be concise.



## Basic “LTE” Outline

**Respond to an article.** An outlet will more likely publish your LTE if it’s a direct response to a story they ran, and some outlets even ask that you reference a specific article. Open your LTE by citing the original story’s title and date. If the topic you want to write on has not been covered by the outlet recently, open your LTE by voicing your concern that the paper hasn’t focused on this important issue.

**Share your perspective.** Who are you? Why do you care about this issue? Do you have any qualifications or characteristics that lend you certain expertise (for example, an immigrant lawyer writing about migrant detention or a mom with young children worried about air pollution). This section is the ideal space to share any faith-based commitments you may have, as well as discuss any relevant teachings your faith tradition has about the issue.

**Share a (personal) story.** A story about the impacts of the issue - whether you’ve been personally impacted or know someone personally impacted - is a key way to persuade others, as well as give your argument credibility. Remember to be honest about the story and not over-exaggerate your claims.

**State your ask.** What action do you hope will come from the public conversation around this issue? How do you want people to respond to the issue? Your LTE should ideally have one target audience: for example, your fellow citizens, an elected official, a corporation, etc. If you target an elected official or a corporation, be sure to include their full name in your letter.

**Sign off,** with your name and your city.

## An Example of an “LTE”

*The Washington Times - January 22, 2017*

### “Respond to an article.”

I was encouraged to read in “Protesters, Democrats open fire on EPA nominee Pruitt at Senate hearings” (Web, Jan. 18) that Scott Pruitt, Donald Trump’s nomination to lead the Environmental Protection Agency, acknowledged climate change isn’t a hoax.

### “Share your perspective.”

However, as a Catholic, I am concerned that Mr. Pruitt still does not accept the scientific consensus that the climate change we’re experiencing is caused by a wasteful overconsumption of the Earth’s resources, as Pope Francis and hundreds of other faith, military and business leaders affirm. It also troubles me that Mr. Pruitt did not recognize that climate change is harming human health — and doing so now.

### “Share a (personal) story.”

Even in the nation’s capital we can see the dire consequences of climate change. For example, a local community garden grows fruits and vegetables and distributes them to Washington’s community food banks. Last October they reported that there was a “34 percent decrease in vegetable produce in September 2016 from September 2015 [which] was primarily due to hotter weather conditions.” That’s 34 percent less food that can be given to those who go without. Climate change is making our neighbors go hungry.

### “State your ask.”

Before they vote on Mr. Pruitt’s nomination, I call on our elected officials to consider how strongly Mr. Pruitt would protect God’s creation and ensure that America’s citizens, especially America’s less fortunate citizens, do not suffer needlessly because of climate change.

### “Sign off.”

Wesley Cocozello  
Washington, DC •



# A more just world is possible

Pope Francis ended his [2015 speech to Congress](#) by praising the example of four great Americans: President Abraham Lincoln, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton.

"A nation can be considered great when it defends liberty as Lincoln did, when it fosters a culture which enables people to 'dream' of full rights for all their brothers and sisters, as Martin Luther King sought to do; when it strives for justice and the cause of the oppressed, as Dorothy Day did by her tireless work, the fruit of a faith which becomes dialogue and sows peace in the contemplative style of Thomas Merton."

These four are models of political action. They each demonstrate how our faith can inform our advocacy.

Our advocacy must always aim at restoring hope, righting wrongs, maintaining commitments, and thereby promote the well-being of all individuals and their communities.

A more just world is possible. A world defined by peace and the common good, the world envisioned by Lincoln, King, Day, and Merton, is possible, but only if each of us gets involved!

We hope this resource helps you on your advocacy journey. You can download more of the Columban JPE for Advocacy and Outreach's resources [here](#).

Columban JPE believes that policies and decisions should be informed by the experiences of the people most impacted by those policies and decisions. We advocate for peace and justice, and are guided by the Gospels, Catholic Social Teaching, and the experience of Columban missionaries and the communities they serve.

Our advocacy priorities are ecology and US/MX border justice.

Columban JPE is a project of the Missionary Society of St. Columban. We live in solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, and the wounded earth. In 16 countries around the world, we work to empower people and one another.

Thank you for using this resource. ●