

THE CERTIFIED ADVOCATE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM U.S. CONGRESS 101

At the General Board of Church and Society, we believe advocacy is an expression of faith lived in public. It is not separate from discipleship but deeply connected to it. When people of faith engage the civic process, they embody a tradition rooted in prophetic witness, communal responsibility, and the pursuit of justice. Understanding Congress—how it functions, why it matters, and how policies move through it—is essential to faithful and effective advocacy. Civic literacy strengthens moral witness, and moral witness becomes most effective when grounded in knowledge of the systems that shape public life.

Much of our advocacy at GBCS focuses on Congress because Congress is designed to serve as the primary representative body of the people. Members of Congress are elected officials, accountable to the voters who send them to Washington. Unlike federal judges, who are appointed for life, or executive agencies that implement policy, Congress reflects the will and concerns of communities across the nation. Every member of the House of Representatives represents a specific district, and every Senator represents an entire state. This structure ensures that constituents—people of faith, community leaders, advocates, and everyday citizens—have direct access to decision-makers.

This principle of representation is fundamental to why advocacy efforts prioritize congressional engagement. Members of Congress are responsible not only for passing laws but also for listening to the people they serve. Offices track constituent communication, including calls, emails, visits, and letters. When individuals and organized communities communicate clearly and consistently, their voices are documented and considered. For advocates grounded in faith traditions, this represents an opportunity to bear witness to moral concerns and lived realities. Advocacy is not merely about influencing policy outcomes; it is about reminding elected officials that their decisions affect human lives—families seeking stability, migrants pursuing safety, workers striving for dignity, elders requiring care, and communities seeking justice.

Understanding how Congress is structured further strengthens advocacy effectiveness. Congress functions as the legislative branch of the federal government and holds responsibility for creating laws, overseeing federal agencies, and controlling government spending. It consists of two chambers: the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House includes 435 voting members who serve two-year terms, representing relatively small geographic districts. This structure often makes House members more closely connected to local concerns. The Senate, by contrast, includes 100 members—two from each state—who serve six-year terms. Senators typically consider broader statewide priorities and longer-term policy implications.

Within both chambers, committees play a central role in shaping legislation. Most substantive work occurs not on the chamber floor but within these specialized groups. Committees review proposed legislation, hold hearings, gather testimony from experts and community stakeholders, and revise legislative language before bills move forward. For example, Appropriations Committees oversee federal spending, Judiciary Committees address immigration and civil rights matters, and tax policy flows through committees such as Ways and Means in the House and Finance in the Senate. For advocates, understanding committee assignments is particularly important because members serving on specific committees often hold significant influence over policies related to their jurisdiction.

To advocate effectively, it is also necessary to understand the legislative process itself—how an idea becomes a law. The process typically begins with a concept that may originate from a Member of Congress, community organization, advocacy group, or concerned constituent. Once drafted into formal language, the proposal becomes a bill and is introduced in either the House or Senate. Following introduction, the bill is assigned to a committee for evaluation. Committees review the proposal, hold hearings if necessary, and revise the bill through a process known as mark-up.

If a committee approves the bill, it moves to the floor of the chamber where it is debated and voted upon. If the bill passes one chamber, it must then pass the other chamber in identical form. Differences between House and Senate versions are resolved through negotiation, often involving a conference committee. Once both chambers agree on a final version, the bill is sent to the President. The President may sign the bill into law or veto it. If vetoed, Congress has the authority to override the veto with a two-thirds majority vote in both chambers.

While this process outlines the formal path of legislation, advocates must recognize that many bills never become law. In fact, the majority of introduced bills stall in committee or fail to advance. Advocacy therefore extends beyond final votes. It includes shaping legislation during early drafting stages, influencing committee deliberations, and building sustained support among policymakers and communities. Effective advocacy is continuous rather than episodic, rooted in long-term engagement rather than single moments of action.

In addition to understanding the legislative process, advocates must become familiar with the primary legislative vehicles through which policy changes occur. While standalone bills often receive public attention, many policy decisions are embedded within broader legislative frameworks that move through Congress with greater frequency and urgency.

Standalone bills represent individual legislative proposals addressing specific policy concerns. These bills often introduce new ideas, define priorities, and generate public awareness. Even when standalone bills do not pass, they serve as important markers

that shape future policy development. Advocates frequently support standalone legislation to demonstrate momentum, establish policy direction, and articulate moral priorities.

Appropriations legislation represents another critical vehicle, particularly for faith-based advocates concerned with real-world outcomes. Appropriations bills determine how federal funds are allocated across programs and agencies. These bills are passed annually and shape funding decisions affecting healthcare access, housing programs, education initiatives, immigration services, and community-based support systems. In many respects, appropriations decisions determine whether authorized programs function effectively or fail due to lack of resources. Because budgets reflect priorities, they are often described as moral documents that reveal whose needs are addressed and whose are overlooked.

Budget legislation, particularly reconciliation bills, also plays a significant role in shaping public policy. The reconciliation process allows Congress to enact major fiscal policy changes with a simple majority vote in the Senate, bypassing procedural barriers that typically require broader consensus. Reconciliation bills often address taxation, healthcare policy, environmental initiatives, and investments in social safety net programs. For advocates, reconciliation periods represent moments of heightened importance, as large-scale policy changes often move rapidly during these legislative windows.

Large legislative packages, such as omnibus bills and continuing resolutions, also deserve careful attention. Omnibus bills combine multiple policy areas into a single piece of legislation, often addressing wide-ranging government functions. Continuing resolutions provide temporary funding to keep the federal government operating when full appropriations bills are delayed. These legislative vehicles frequently include policy provisions—sometimes referred to as riders—that can significantly affect programs and protections. Because of their size and urgency, omnibus measures and continuing resolutions often serve as vehicles through which major policy decisions are enacted.

For faith-based advocates, understanding these legislative pathways is not merely technical knowledge—it is moral preparation. Policy decisions influence the daily lives of individuals and communities, shaping access to healthcare, education, employment, housing, and legal protections. When Congress debates spending priorities or legislative proposals, it is making choices about justice, equity, and opportunity. These choices carry moral weight, and advocates grounded in faith traditions recognize the responsibility to engage them thoughtfully and persistently.

Faith-rooted advocacy calls individuals to bring moral clarity into civic spaces. This work does not require technical mastery of every policy detail but does demand commitment to learning, listening, and speaking with integrity. Advocates offer more than statistics or arguments; they bring stories, values, and lived experiences that illuminate the human

impact of public decisions. They remind policymakers that legislation is not abstract—it shapes the conditions under which people live, work, worship, and thrive.

Ultimately, understanding Congress empowers advocates to participate more effectively in public life. Knowledge of legislative structures, processes, and vehicles strengthens confidence and deepens engagement. As Certified Advocates within the General Board of Church and Society, participants are preparing not only to understand Congress but to interact with it—to speak, to listen, and to advocate with purpose. This work reflects a long-standing tradition within faith communities: to engage systems of power not with fear or resignation, but with conviction, compassion, and hope.

In this way, advocacy becomes more than civic participation. It becomes a form of faithful witness—an act of public discipleship grounded in justice, dignity, and the belief that collective action can shape a more equitable and compassionate society.