



A peace pole is planted in front of the United Methodist building.

POLICY AND

prayer

by Emmett Witkovsky-Eldred

The sign in front of the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., is arguably the most influential church sign in the United States. Standing in the shadow of the Supreme Court and pointed directly at the Capitol Building right across Constitution Avenue, this sign is seen by many of the most powerful people in the nation. Members of Congress and their staff, Supreme Court justices, members of the media, and officials in the president's administration walk past it regularly. It serves as a public witness, lifting up the faith dimensions of policy.

The only non-federally owned building on Capitol Hill, the United Methodist building is home to the advocacy ministries of several Christian denominations, including the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, and, of course, the United Methodist Church. The Church of the Brethren's peace witness once resided there, too.

Dozens more interfaith advocacy organizations also operate there, from the National Council of Churches, to Church World Service, to the Islamic Society of North America and Churches for Middle East Peace. Each of

these offices is driven by the shared understanding that witnessing for peace and justice is part of a full and faithful relationship with God.

"We view the physical presence of this building as a ministry and as a witness to Washington, D.C., to the world, and to lawmakers," says Tricia Bruckbauer, director of communications for the United Methodist Church's office for Church and Society. "Throughout its history, this building has served as a staging ground for numerous movements for justice and peace, and the General Board for Church and Society of the United Methodist Church sees the offering of this space to those causes as a ministry."

There are many more faith-based advocacy organizations in D.C. than could ever fit into one building, including the Church of the Brethren's own peace witness and my employer, the Friends Committee on National Legislation. But the United Methodist Building, where Martin Luther King Jr. finalized plans for the March on Washington, is a powerful and tangible reminder of God's presence and movement during the legislative and political process, even when the legislation that Congress ultimately writes falls short of God's vision for equity, peace, and justice for all. It's



This sign at the United Methodist building appeared on Sen. Cory Booker's Instagram feed. It reads, "Protest is our prayer in action. End gun violence now!"

Elliott Whittowsky/Eldred

a reminder, also, of the many people who serve the church and God by bearing witness for the public interest.

The faith-based advocacy community doesn't often bathe in the limelight that illuminates so many other corners of Washington, D.C. But whenever I walk past this building and its prophetic sign, I'm reminded of their presence and their work, and I'm full of hope.

Fifty years of witness in Washington

The Church of the Brethren's witness in Washington grew from its historic status as a peace church. While the denomination admonishes its members not to participate in war personally, Brethren have also long engaged in advocacy and witness against war. In 1962, the Church of the Brethren first sponsored an official representative in Washington to witness for peace and justice by communicating the denomination's perspective on important policy issues.

Since 2012, Nate Hosler has led the Church of the Brethren Office of Peacebuilding and Policy (formerly the Office of Public Witness). Working with finite time and resources in a frenetic political environment, Hosler must identify the issues on which his office can make a difference as it seeks to represent the perspective of the Church of the Brethren.

The office draws its policy directives from Annual Conference statements. But that leaves a vast array of possible issues. In its 300 years, the Church of the Brethren has issued plenty of statements. According to Hosler, "The other piece comes from asking a strategic question: Where do we have a particular voice or value-add? Some of this is denominational, some of this is personal, and some of it comes by recognizing the issues where we see ecumenical groups coalescing, building momentum, or leaving gaps."

Hosler chose to work on peacebuilding in Nigeria because it matches those criteria. "We have long, historic ties to Nigeria. We participated in a congressional briefing on Nigeria a few years ago, and an NGO partner said, 'We've

been working in Nigeria since 2010.' Then when it was my turn to speak, I said, 'We've been in Nigeria since the 1920s.' Most of the NGOs that we work with didn't even exist when we started working in the areas affected by Boko Haram today. At the same time, there's not a lot of action. So there's some space to work, there's a need, and we have a unique value-add." Hosler also lived and worked in Nigeria, giving him the expertise to be an effective advocate on that issue.

Another focus issue for the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy is the military's use of drones. The Church of the Brethren was the first denomination to issue a statement condemning drone warfare, giving the church's peace witness in Washington a unique platform on that issue. In recent years, as he observed the ecumenical community emphasizing racial justice, Hosler has incorporated more advocacy on systemic racism into the office's Going to the Garden initiative on hunger and food-related justice.

Ice cream and manure

Last August, I moved to D.C. to begin working for the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL). FCNL is a Quaker-based public interest lobbying organization that advocates for peace and social justice across a dozen legislative programs. I still struggle to say that I work for a *lobbying* organization because that word carries a lot of baggage. Soon after moving here, I had to open a new bank account. When they bank teller asked my occupation and I responded "lobbyist," her eye-roll could have knocked down a small city. Her look said, "Oh, you're one of *those* people."

Often, people react with the same skepticism and wariness to the whole concept of faith-based lobbying. It's understandable. Tony Campolo once quipped that "mixing religion and politics is like mixing ice cream and manure. It doesn't do much to the manure, but it sure does ruin the ice cream." We've all seen how faith can be manipulated, distorted, and weaponized by politics.

For some, lobbying from a faith perspective is just asking for faith to get muddied by partisan polarization. Hosler considers this with great care when he selects issues on which to focus. Just because there's an Annual Conference policy about an issue doesn't mean that the whole denomination agrees, especially when that issue evokes deep partisan divides.

"On some issues where I've felt that there's a fair amount of partisan divide and there's a lot of ecumenical work already happening, and I didn't think we had a whole lot of specifics to add, I've decided that this just isn't where we're going to invest a lot of energy," Hosler says.

But sometimes, the Church of the Brethren's historic witness is too distinctive or the moment is too electric for

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the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy to remain quiet.

“We don’t soften our voice, but we try to address some of the concerns,” Hosler says. “On gun violence, one partisan end calls for gun control and the other says we should be focusing on better mental health care, and our policy says something about both. We should be controlling access to guns, but we should also be doing the pastoral work to ensure that people with mental illness are cared for. We try to address the breadth of the concern through the breadth that is conveyed in our Annual Conference statement, hopefully in a theologically robust way.”

Others aren’t concerned about partisanship; they’re concerned about power. Concentrated power can harm the powerless, often through violence or oppression. How can people of faith appropriately collect and leverage power through lobbying? Isn’t it better to stick to direct service?

Hosler responds, “Both as the Church of the Brethren and as the broader church, we have a historic and longstanding commitment to serving and peacemaking. I see advocacy simply as an extension of that. If we’re willing to go out of our way to figure out how to feed people, it seems shortsighted to me to not also ask why people are hungry in the first place and seek to address that.”

Hosler cautions that the church must not amass power

The Friends Committee on National Legislation building.



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that it can use to impose change for its own benefit. “The subtitle of our office is ‘A Witness of the Church of the Brethren.’ Bearing witness is different than seeking to coerce change.” He says, “One of the reasons that our advocacy is different than the stereotypical notion of lobbying is that nothing that we work on has any direct benefit for us or the people who pay for our work.”

Unmoored from seeking personal gain, the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy and faith-based advocacy agencies can pursue the public interest, striving faithfully and ethically to realize God’s vision for peace with justice.

Policy and prayer

At FCNL we emphasize the power and moral clarity that prayerfulness can instill in our work. Prayer fills the deep spiritual reservoir from which we draw the energy and inspiration to lobby. But over past months, the notion of prayer in policy has come under serious scrutiny, and understandably so. Perhaps the most serious challenge to faith-based advocacy isn’t the concern about polarization or power, but prayer.

In the wake of tragic instances of gun violence, the rote invocation of “thoughts and prayers” has proven inadequate. Fed up, many people dismiss out of hand the very mention of prayer: “We don’t need thoughts and prayers; we need action,” goes the chorus, in a thousand variations.

Agencies like the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy show that prayer and policy can supplement one another rather than compete. “As a church, we are people who gather to pray and serve our community,” says Hosler. It’s not appropriate to say, “Well, now we can’t pray anymore; we need to get around to acting,” he explains. And it’s also not appropriate to say, “Well, we should just pray and count that as good.”

“As a church we are constituted around the act of gathering to worship, and we are constituted around the act of gathering to serve our neighbor. When there’s violence, we are already gathered to pray, and then we go out to address it.” 

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