

Christians With a Cause

Some organizations use traditional lobbying techniques to influence congressmen and senators. Others use a different approach that affects both votes and the personal lives of elected officials.

By **BRUCE BUCKINGHAM**

Lobbying is big business in Washington, D.C. Each working day, more than 10,000 lobbyists rush through the halls of congressional buildings, phone legislative assistants and put together informational packets and special mailers. All have one goal: get the attention of a congressman or a senator.

Trade unions, professional associations, foreign embassies, legal advisors and government relations people each bid to influence legislation that will affect their constituency. Yet these are only the formal, ongoing lobbying efforts. Congressmen receive thousands of letters each day from individuals, from civic groups and, yes, from religious organizations. There are even companies that specialize in computerized mass mailings to congressmen.

Some of these inquiries deal with major issues such as abortion, taxes and military spending. But an equal number are truly special interest causes or even

individual needs. Legislative assistants must deal with pleas for airline employee fringe benefits, requests to make square dancing the official national dance and pleas from an emigre who wants help getting his fiancée out of Romania.

No wonder it's hard to determine exactly what message is getting through to congressmen on some issues. It's hard for even the most organized office to weed through the maze of information that piles up on their desks.

Yet they do—some better than others. And most are ready to accept applause and accolades from a special interest group when that much-wanted bill becomes law. On the other hand, when a policy is supported that is unpopular with any lobbying segment, congressional offices brace to duck the blows that will surely come in the aftermath.

Christians are not excluded from this struggle to influence the influential. In recent years pastors, religious leaders and all types of laymen have been speaking

out and getting involved like never before. Involvement by groups such as the Moral Majority and the Christian Voice have gained widespread publicity. There are many others that approach congressmen using time-proven lobbying techniques.

According to the *Washington Representatives Guide Book*—a comprehensive listing of lobbying groups, law firms and public relations organizations that work in the capital—more than 30 official groups can be tied to religious causes. These organizations are diverse, but each has expressed an intent to communicate religious concerns and principles to congressmen, the White House and other government agencies.

These groups range from the Moral Majority to the YMCA, yet also include the B'nai B'rith International (a Jewish organization), the National Association of Evangelicals, the Committee for Pro-Life Activities, the National Black



During Washington for Jesus in 1980, Christians expressed their concern for both the moral fiber of America and for individual lives. Here thousands of people gathered near the Capitol building. The event was a success in itself, but more than that, many ministries active in Washington, D.C., today sprung out of that landmark expression of Christian unity.

Catholic Clergy Caucus and the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.

Their modus operandi includes scheduling appointments with congressmen to discuss very specific issues. This is done strictly on a business level with all of the proper protocol connected with official Washington.

While for purposes of remaining a tax-exempt organization some shun the label *lobbyist*, they do seek to influence. Taking up a particular issue, they visit the proper subcommittee—depending upon the issue—and ask for funding for a specific project or for a specific bill to be passed (or not passed).

These approaches can be very effective in individual case-by-case situations. Many bills have been passed (or not passed) because of these groups.

While traditional lobbying efforts are effective, perhaps the most influential Christian lobbying is not done by those who clamor to be heard through traditional means. There are other people who

visit Capitol Hill unassumingly, seeking to develop interpersonal relationships with senators and congressmen on a one-to-one basis.

These people are not lobbyists in the traditional sense. In fact, most say their primary purpose is to share God's love. They don't stand at the end of Capitol Hill hallways trying to catch members as they hurry to a vote. The relationships they try to build are not lobbyist-to-elected official, but Christian-to-Christian. Most congressmen claim affiliation to some Christian denomination.

Many of these individuals and the organizations they represent shun publicity. They prefer to stay in the wings, to simply "be available" when a member of Congress needs to discuss a particular issue. They also make themselves available for prayer and fellowship. They do not "lobby" specific issues, but work toward a long-term relationship. They do not necessarily set out to influence political actions. Rather, they seek to influence the religious commitments and

involvement of specific members. In the long-run, however, this type of influence will directly affect votes.

"We don't want to draw attention to ourselves," said one such lobbyist during a recent visit with a member of Congress. "We want only to share God's love, never demanding and never pretentious."

In some cases, he said, if certain groups or individuals were to discover that their representative was associating with Christians in an official capacity, the member would be harassed and possibly charged with favoring one religion over another.

"We don't want to put any senator or congressman in an awkward position," he said. "We simply desire to be an outlet for their frustrations and be available for personal prayer."

The Christian Embassy (an independent organization with no affiliation with the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem) works in this manner. As an interdenominational group, they organize

Bible studies among politicians in Washington and at the United Nations in New York City. The Embassy does not even consider itself a lobbying organization.

Swede Anderson, the Christian Embassy's director, and other Embassy representatives have developed working relationships with dozens of top Washington officials: not only with senators and congressmen, but with key people in the White House, at the Pentagon, in foreign embassies and in other government agencies. On a practical level, the Embassy holds weekly prayer meetings for congressional staff members and sets up special conferences for federal employees.

"The Christian Embassy is not a partisan or political organization. They are dedicated 100 percent to sharing the Scripture," explained Randy Knepper, administrative assistant for Congressman Earl Hutto (D-Florida).

This non-partisan stance wins the group entree into government offices on both sides of the political fence. Where The Moral Majority is seen by many Democrats as being a Republican mouthpiece, the non-lobbying lobbyists enter both camps with the gospel.

Youth With a Mission takes a similar approach. Recently the international missionary group purchased and completely renovated a three story townhouse near the House of Representatives office buildings and the Supreme Court. YWAM, and several organizations that have joined with them in the effort, say they want to provide a place where Christian members of Congress can feel comfortable. The house is known as "133 'C' Street," after its address. But YWAM workers affectionately say the "133" really refers to the 133rd Psalm which speaks of the unity of the Lordship of Christ.

"We wanted our public officials to know there is a place they can come and visit with each other that has a totally Christian environment," said YWAM Washington Director Ron Boehme. "We wanted a location as close as possible to their offices, yet out of the spotlight of their offices—a Christian depot where someone can come in and meet and pray."

The idea for "133 'C' Street" developed after the "Washington for Jesus" crusade attracted more than half a million people to Washington in 1980. YWAM had been instrumental in coordinating that day of prayer for the nation.

"As a result of that highly successful gathering," Boehme said, "we were approached by a man who said he had a townhouse, in a choice location, that he would like to sell to us for the purpose of turning it into a Christian center for intercession."

Since that time, YWAM has brought together several Christian ministries to form a core group for the center. Other groups include: Maranatha Campus Ministries, the National Religious Broadcasters, the American Heritage Foundation and Faith America Foundation.

"We are unity minded," Boehme explained. "We work with Campus Crusade, the Moral Majority and other established lobbying organizations."

YWAM influences congressmen in many ways, primarily through service and example which come about through direct, personal contacts.

The Institute on Religion and Democracy influences in a somewhat different manner. Located in the basement of a Washington high rise, the IRD was formed in 1981 to promote a more conservative foreign policy view within the Catholic and Protestant churches and to combat what was perceived to be a "leftist bias" in their organized political activities.

While Maria Thomas, IRD's administrative director, is quick to point out that the group has no official contact with Congress, there are nonetheless "unofficial" or "indirect" conduits that influence.

"Even though the Institute does not deal directly with Congress, we do have goals that concern political activities concerning the Church, both domestic and foreign," Mrs. Thomas explained. "For instance, we oppose the support many churches give to anti-democratic organizations, such as the IRA and SWAPO, and we have encouraged churches nationwide to accurately report to their members what, if any, support goes to these or similar organizations."

For more information about these groups you may write to them directly: The Institute on Religion and Democracy, 1000 16th St. NW, Suite 1150, Washington, D.C. 20036; Youth With a Mission, 133 'C' St. SE, Washington, D.C. 20003; Christian Embassy, 2009 N. 14th St, Suite 610, N. Arlington, VA 22201. ■

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