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#### **How To Write a Letter To Your MP**

*By Sandy McMurray*

Canadian members of Parliament receive thousands of messages from constituents by letter, fax and e-mail each week. A well-written letter can draw attention to a problem or influence public policy. A poorly written letter may cause offence, confuse the issue or simply be ignored. Here are a few tips for Christians who want to write effective letters to MPs.



#### **Brief is Better**

How long should your letter be? Douglas Cryer, director of public policy for The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC), suggests that one page should be enough. "Get to the point," says Cryer. "Long letters are more likely to be discarded." Chris Derksen-Hiebert, a policy analyst in World Vision Canada's advocacy department, agrees. "Keep your letter to one side of a page if possible, saying what you need to say as briefly and clearly as you can."

#### **Clarity is key**

You may be tempted to address several issues in a single letter, but you should focus on one thing at a time. "Avoid sending a letter that has four or five points about things that concern you," advises Derksen-Hiebert. "Say very clearly in the first sentence what the letter is about. Have a friend or a spouse read the letter to make sure you got your point across."

#### **Get personal**

When you write about a specific policy, focus on how it affects you. Use personal examples that support your point. This makes your letter stand out and makes it more memorable.

"A good anecdote or example is useful fodder for speeches," notes Wes McLeod, executive director of the Faith Political Interface Program with the Manning Centre for Building Democracy. McLeod is an ordained pastor who was on Parliament Hill for 13 years working with MPs including Deborah Grey and Chuck Strahl.

"Thousands of names come to legislatures on petitions," says McLeod. "Letters tend to be treated differently. If there are good ideas in them, MPs will take those ideas forward to a committee meeting or work them into speeches. If there is a specific example of how a policy has affected a person, that's helpful."

#### **Reach the right MP**

Your own member of Parliament may not be the best person to contact. If your concern is related to social policy, you may want to write to the minister of justice

or the minister of foreign affairs.

“Address the letter to that person or minister and send a copy to your local member of Parliament,” suggests Derksen-Hiebert. “It’s good for the main recipient to know you have sent the letter to others, and it’s good for local MPs to see what’s being said by their constituents. I would always recommend that, if you send a letter to the prime minister, you also send a copy to your local MP.”

### **Nice matters**

You may disagree with your MP and you may express your position strongly but be sure to do it in a respectful way. “If you are writing about an action the government has taken, don’t just be critical,” advises Cryer. “Your letter should respond with some kind of solution or alternative.”

“Letters that are angry and disrespectful are less likely to be heard,” says Derksen-Hiebert. “It’s very appropriate that people express their concerns strongly, but the wording should not suggest you’re preaching or you’re angry at the person or the government.”

A letter filled with angry words and Scripture references is likely to be received as hate mail. “At World Vision, we’re clear in all our communication that we are writing as a Christian organization,” says Derksen-Hiebert, “but we don’t lace our letters with biblical references. I think you’re more likely to be written off and less likely to be heard. The government does not set policy with specific references to theology, though Christians might wish it did. It’s not going to help your cause to expect the government to base its policy on specific biblical references.”

### **You get points for style**

Letters that are handwritten or signed by hand seem to be more effective than form letters and e-mail.

“When you’re responding to over 100 e-mails a day, you have to process through them very quickly, and they all look the same,” says Cryer. “With a letter, you have to grab the envelope, open and unfold it, and look at it. The simple process of handling the letter gives it more attention.” If you do go the e-mail route, be sure to put the subject of the letter in the subject line. If you are from that MP’s constituency, include that in the subject line. The e-mail may garner more attention.

### **Honourable mentions**

When you address your letter, remember to use the right honorific. It’s proper to address the prime minister as “The Rt. Honourable” and start the letter with “Dear Prime Minister.” Cabinet ministers and premiers should be addressed as “The Honourable” and their letters should begin with “Dear Mr. Minister” or “Dear Madame Minister.” MLAs or MPs should be addressed as “Mr. surname MLA” or “Ms. surname MP.”

### **Ask for a response**

Once you’ve made your point – clearly, strongly and with respect – request a reply. Ask what will be done to address your concern and close with “I look forward to your response.” Be sure to sign your name and include your return address. Most MPs will respond to letters from their own constituents. If you

receive a response to your letter, write back to say thank you! It costs you nothing (no postage required) and it shows you appreciate the attention paid to your letter.

“When MPs are thanked for responding or when constituents say thank you for a policy change, that’s going to be very meaningful,” says Wes McLeod. “If your MP is a Christian, it’s also very meaningful if you write to say, ‘I’m praying for you.’ ”

### **Why it matters**

Chris Derksen-Hiebert notes a recent example of government responding to constituents who wrote letters: “World Vision has been active in addressing the conflict in Northern Uganda, and we asked a number of our supporters to contact the government, urging the Foreign Affairs Department to do something.

“Several hundred people wrote to the minister of foreign affairs, and the minister’s office called to let us know we had been heard. They clearly responded to our call and let us know what they were doing to address that issue.”

### **The last word**

The very reason for being able to write to the government for free is to encourage that communication. “When you write to the government you don’t have to put a stamp on your letter,” notes Wes McLeod. “It’s a public policy that is meant to encourage interaction between electors and their elected representatives. Use that avenue. Keep those letters coming!”

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